

Burchi, Francesco; Roscioli, Federico

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Can integrated social protection programmes affect social cohesion? Mixed-methods evidence from Malawi

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Discussion Paper

3/2021

Can Integrated Social Protection Programmes Affect Social Cohesion?

Mixed-Methods Evidence from Malawi

Francesco Burchi
Federico Roscioli

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Dr Francesco Burchi is a senior researcher with the research programme “Transformation of Economic and Social Systems” at the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE).

E-Mail: francesco.burchi@die-gdi.de

Federico Roscioli is a coordinator of the master’s degree programme “Human Development and Food Security” at the Roma Tre University and a master’s student in “Development Economics” at the University of Florence.

Email: federico.roscioli@gmail.com

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© Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik gGmbH
Tulpenfeld 6, 53113 Bonn
☎ +49 (0)228 94927-0
☎ +49 (0)228 94927-130
Email: die@die-gdi.de
<http://www.die-gdi.de>



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Abbreviations

AEC	area executive committee
COMSIP	Malawian Community Savings and Investment Promotion
GIZ	German Corporation for International Cooperation GmbH / Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
SCT	social cash transfer
TEEP	Tingathe Economic Empowerment Project
VDC	village development committee
VSL	village savings and loans

Executive summary

Background and aim

The primary objective of social protection is to fight poverty and food insecurity. However, there are good theoretical arguments to support the idea that it can also contribute to more complex outcomes, such as social cohesion. This paper investigates the effects of the Tingathe Economic Empowerment Project (TEEP) in Malawi on three key pillars of social cohesion, namely inclusive identity, trust and cooperation. The TEEP is a multi-component social protection scheme that targets ultra-poor and labour-constrained households. It provides three randomly selected groups of beneficiaries with three different packages: a lump-sum transfer, financial and business training connected to the creation of village savings and loans (VSL) groups, and a combination of both (comprehensive package).

A sequential mixed-methods approach was employed to assess the effects of the different project components. It consists of (i) a quantitative analysis based on an experimental design and primary data collected one year after project implementation and (ii) a qualitative analysis based on focus group discussions and individual interviews conducted three years after project implementation.

Results

Overall, the empirical analysis gives evidence that the type of measure taken matters for the effect of social protection on social cohesion. The study reveals no concrete effects of the lump-sum on social cohesion outcomes. In contrast, the financial and business training makes a difference for social cohesion and both the methods point to the value added of participation in VSL groups. Indeed, high intra-group trust was detected in almost all these groups and the experience of taking part in a common training that participants regarded as very valuable was viewed as a key determinant of this outcome. Moreover, members of the same VSL groups activated different forms of cooperation, for both economic and non-economic purposes. Exposure to major external shocks, however, hindered these positive effects.

VSL members' trust towards other village members (outgroup trust), instead, was low and declined. Similarly, trust towards local institutions, especially village development committees, was low. An in-depth investigation of the causes indicates that this is not related to the TEEP but to the social cash transfer (SCT) programme on whose infrastructure the TEEP rests – as their beneficiaries and administrative structure are the same. Other village members considered it unfair that VSL members received the SCT and this caused jealousy and tensions. Moreover, the members of the VSL groups felt that the local institutions excluded them from other development interventions as they were already benefiting from the SCT programme. We could not verify whether this discrimination was real (or just perceived); however, both the literature and our analysis point to the plausibility of this hypothesis.

Policy implications:

The findings of this study have important policy implications.

- First, policy-makers aiming to expand social cohesion should be aware of the possible limitations of simply giving cash. Indeed, targeted cash benefit programmes that are not adequately designed or implemented could hinder social cohesion.
- Second, VSL groups, which are already widespread in Malawi for the middle class, can contribute to the expansion of social cohesion and, more generally, can work for the poor, too.
- Third, there is a need for longer-term support from external organisations. As stressed directly by the interviewees, more external assistance would have probably allowed the re-opening of those VSL groups that had to close in 2017 due to extreme weather conditions and the delay in some SCT payments.

This paper explores avenues along which the social cohesion-enhancing potential of VSL groups could be further exploited. A major dilemma is whether to open VSL groups to other village members; this could either improve or worsen social cohesion depending on the local context.

1 Introduction

The primary objective of social protection is to reduce poverty and vulnerability (OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development], 2009). However, over the past couple of decades, the goals of social protection schemes have expanded, covering, among other things, the increase in human capital and the alleviation of nutritional deprivations. Moreover, it has often been argued that social protection can generate important effects in the political sphere. This paper contributes to this (limited) literature, focusing specifically on social cohesion.

Social cohesion is a complex, multi-faceted concept and there is not much agreement on its meaning. In this paper, we endorse a recent definition that identifies three key attributes of social cohesion – namely trust, inclusive identity and cooperation – and two separate dimensions – the horizontal and the vertical (Leininger et al., forthcoming). The horizontal dimension includes the relationship between individuals or groups within a society, while the vertical dimension refers to the relationship between individuals/groups and state institutions.

Both social assistance programmes, such as cash transfers and public works, and contributory schemes, such as health insurance, have the potential to improve social relations (Pavanello, Watson, Onyango-Ouma, & Bukuluki, 2016). This can happen through different channels. By increasing their employment opportunities and/or access to income, disadvantaged groups may experience a greater sense of belonging in society and improved interactions with other groups. Similarly, this can occur when social protection enables disadvantaged groups to access social services and infrastructure that were previously closed to them. However, for this to happen it is important that the social protection programme is designed with an inclusion lens through which the needs of disadvantaged groups, based on ethnicity, social class, caste, gender and age, are adequately considered (Koehler, forthcoming). The design and implementation of these programmes is crucial. Lack of transparency in the targeting of the beneficiaries, for example, can create feeling of unfairness and resentment, and thus worsen social relations (Molyneux, Jones, & Samuels, 2016). In particular, it can create conflicts between those who were selected as beneficiaries and those who were excluded but perceived to be in similar conditions (e.g., Adato, de la Briere, Mindek, & Quisumbing, 2000; Adato & Roopnaraine, 2004). Specifically, cash benefits targeted to the poor can increase stigma and thus reduce social inclusion and social cohesion when not conscientiously designed (Li & Walker, 2017; Roelen, 2017). At the same time, if these programmes are not endorsed by the parts of society that are not directly addressed by the interventions, the net effect of these programmes on social cohesion may be negative.

There are also important arguments supporting the premises that social protection may affect the vertical dimension of social cohesion. When governments (both national and local) play a key role in the financing and/or management of the programme, beneficiaries can take that as a signal that the state cares about their interests (Burchi, Strupat, & von Schiller, 2020). The direct consequence is that this can increase their trust towards public institutions (Evans, Holtemeyer, & Kosec, 2019; Hunter & Sugiyama, 2014). However, citizens often have scarce information about who is actually financing and/or implementing a social protection scheme. Consequently, there is the possibility that an effective programme characterised by high national ownership would not lead to an increase in trust towards the state if the beneficiaries were unable to associate the programme with the real implementer; similarly, there could be an increase in vertical trust if the government were

to get credit for a programme in which it played no role.¹ If the programmes were ineffective, non-transparent or clearly politicised, the inverse of these considerations would apply (Molyneux, Jones, & Samuels, 2016).

In general, the empirical evidence is limited and refers mostly to the horizontal dimension. Some studies in Sub-Saharan Africa point to the positive contribution of cash transfers to the strengthening of social relationships and participation in community events (FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations], 2014). Using an experimental design, Attanasio, Pellerano and Reyes (2009) and Attanasio, Polania-Reyes and Pellerano (2015) find that a conditional cash transfer in Colombia significantly increased beneficiaries' willingness to cooperate for altruistic reasons and that these benefits remained over time. Those authors speculate that this positive impact is mainly triggered by the social activities generated through the conditionalities. Two studies focused on refugee settings. Lehmann and Masterson (2014) find that the cash component of a programme targeting Syrian refugees in Lebanon improved Lebanese community members' tolerance of and willingness to support the Syrian refugees (Lehmann & Masterson, 2014). Valli, Peterman and Hidrobo (2019) evaluated a short-term project by the World Food Programme in Ecuador that delivered a mix of cash, food and vouchers together with nutrition training to Colombian refugees and poor Ecuadorians. The impact assessment revealed differences in perceptions of how social cohesion had been affected: the Colombian refugees felt an improvement in social cohesion within the joint community, while the Ecuadorians reported no significant change (Valli, Peterman, & Hidrobo, 2019).

Evidence from countries such as Indonesia, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Nicaragua shows how inadequately designed schemes, in which the targeting of beneficiaries is not clear, non-transparent or simply not properly communicated, generates tensions between selected and non-selected households, leading to a deterioration of social cohesion (Adato & Roopnaraine, 2004; Cameron, Shah, & Olivia, 2013; Kardan, MacAuslan, & Marimo, 2010; Pavanello et al., 2016).

Moving to the evidence concerning vertical relationships, Evans et al. (2019) find that a conditional cash transfer in Tanzania significantly increased trust in local leaders and self-reported willingness to participate in community projects.² Moreover, this effect is significantly higher where beneficiaries were better informed about the central role played by the local government. Camacho (2014) analysed the impact of *Juntos*, a conditional cash transfer in Peru on different indicators of social cohesion. The results indicate no effects on social engagement – measured in terms of membership in different types of organisations – but positive and significant effects on trust in those institutions eligible households were supposed to engage with to satisfy the conditionalities, namely the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and the national registry office. At the same time, the programme had negative spill-over effects on non-eligible households, whose trust in some institutions fell because of the introduction of *Juntos*. Overall, negative effects on societal perceptions of government were detected in other cases, too (Aytaç, 2014; Bruhn, 1996; Guo, 2009).

It is not clear whether the addition of conditionalities to cash transfers improves or worsens perception of the government: in particular, the evidence focusing only on direct beneficiaries

1 This has happened, for example, in the case of a public work programme in Jordan (Loewe et al., 2020).

2 The likelihood of voting, however, is not influenced by the programme.

seems unclear as conditionalities could ensure more engagement with public institutions (Camacho, 2014) but at the same time are often perceived as a burden (Zucco, Luna, & Baykal, 2020). One experimental study in Brazil and Turkey finds that perception of the government and support for cash transfers significantly increases with the introduction of conditionalities among the wealthiest segments of the society (Zucco, Luna, & Baykal, 2020).

Thus, the studies are limited, and the evidence so far is mixed: more research is needed to understand which social protection scheme may enhance social cohesion, how and under which conditions. One of the points emerging from both the theoretical and empirical literature is that a single social protection scheme alone is unlikely to accomplish broader objectives, such as social cohesion. Social protection schemes coordinated in a systemic way or integrated, multi-component interventions may provide larger benefits.

This paper contributes to filling the research gap by analysing the specific effects of the different measures of an integrated social protection programme in Malawi on social cohesion.³ The project that is examined is the Tingathe Economic Empowerment Project (TEEP), which was designed and implemented by the Government of Malawi in cooperation with the German Corporation for International Cooperation GmbH (GIZ) in the Malawian district of Mwanza. It aimed at providing households in extreme poverty with the means to exit poverty. To one group of beneficiaries it offered business capital, to a second group it offered financial and business training, and to a third group it offered a combination of both. The training was intended to incentivise participation in the village savings and loans (VSL) groups. These groups were generated through the project thanks to the work of the local cooperative Malawian Community Savings and Investment Promotion (COMSIP). Therefore, as for all the other interventions reviewed earlier, promoting social cohesion was not an explicit primary objective.

To examine the impacts of the TEEP on social cohesion, we use a two-step mixed-methods approach. First, we exploit the random allocation of the different project components to households located in different clusters of villages to assess their specific impacts on indicators of social cohesion. As the TEEP took place on top of the existing social cash transfer (SCT), we use data from the SCT targeting registry as our baseline and primary data collected in June and July 2017 as our endline. This quantitative assessment highlights the importance of the training and hints at the specific value added of participation in the VSL groups.

Given the findings of the quantitative analysis, in a second step we conducted a qualitative analysis to dig into the dynamics of these groups and their contribution to social cohesion. We did not have a priori expectations as the specific literature assessing the relationship between VSL groups, or microfinance's informal structures, and social cohesion is scarce (van Rooyen, Stewart, & de Wet, 2012) and even in this case is mostly focused on the horizontal dimension. A study in Malawi reveals that participation in VSL groups increased women's self-confidence, self-esteem and ability to control and take action in their lives (Waller, 2014). It also improved trust and respect and strengthened social bonds among members thanks to the continuous interactions among them and helped them overcome the

3 Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world based on both income poverty indices (World Bank, 2020) and multidimensional poverty indices (Burchi, Rippin, & Montenegro, 2018) and has one of the lowest levels of social cohesion in Africa (Leininger et al., forthcoming).

fear of speaking in public and of sharing personal problems with the others. Other studies describe group solidarity in a similar way, demonstrating how group members assisted one another with daily activities and provided support to members in times of need (Gash, 2017; Vanmeenen, 2010). Our qualitative analysis of the TEEP – conducted in September and October 2019 – highlights that horizontal cohesion among members was indeed strengthened by VSL group activity, while horizontal trust among a wider spectrum of people and vertical cohesion were often deteriorated.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews the concept of social cohesion and then justifies the specific definition endorsed in the rest of the paper. Section 3 presents the main features of the TEEP and the theory of change. Section 4 describes the methods and results of the quantitative analysis. Section 5 concentrates on the qualitative analysis of the VSL groups. Finally, conclusions and policy recommendations are provided in Section 6.

2 The meaning of social cohesion

The concept of social cohesion has been long examined especially within the disciplines of sociology and social psychology (Back, 1951; Durkheim, 1893; Festinger, Back, & Schachter, 1950). For a long time, this literature has viewed social cohesion as a phenomenon primarily related to togetherness, that is, the factors that keep people together within a society. Moreover, it has concentrated on high-income countries. Over the past couple of decades, the debate has expanded to other disciplines and to low- and middle-income countries and has captured enormous attention among policy-makers and international organisations (Alexandre, Willman, Aslam, & Rebosio, 2012; Langer, Stewart, Smedts, & Demarest, 2017; OECD, 2011; UNDP [United Nations Development Programme], 2016). New “elements” of social cohesion have been included, such as identification with a country or a group, trust among individuals as well as between individuals and state and local institutions, wellbeing/quality of life and inequality (Langer et al., 2017; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017).

In line with the work of Chan, To and Chan (2006), we argue in favour of a “thin” concept of social cohesion. This means that the definition should include only a few attributes of social cohesion and avoid including the drivers of social cohesion. Including inequality, for example, in the definition would implicitly assume that more unequal societies are less socially cohesive, and thus prevent the ability to study whether and how inequality could impact social cohesion. Similarly, incorporating conflicts would impede an investigation of how social cohesion could affect conflict. At the same time, it would not be useful to use the term “social cohesion” to identify existing (complex and multidimensional) concepts, such as wellbeing and quality of life (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). Finally, we welcome the addition of the “vertical” dimension (Alexandre et al., 2012; Chan et al., 2006; Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier, 2019). The relationship between individuals and state and local institutions is indeed as important as that between individuals or groups for a socially cohesive society.

Consequently, in this paper we endorse the definition provided by Leininger et al. (forthcoming): “social cohesion refers to both the vertical and the horizontal relations among members of society and the state as characterised by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, an inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good (Leininger et al.,

forthcoming)”. It therefore encompasses three attributes: inclusive identity, trust and cooperation for the common good.

People belong (or feel belonging) to different groups, and thus have several identities, some of which are superimposed (such as sex) and some are more freely chosen. A socially cohesive society is one in which individuals with different identities can co-exist in a peaceful way and where some particular identities are not dominant over the overall collective identity. In other words, different group identities are tolerated, recognised and protected. However, in order to conceive a society as cohesive, it is necessary that people feel part of a broader entity (e.g., the nation) that is more than the sum of individuals and that bridges different identities of a society (inclusive identity).

Trust has often appeared as an important ingredient of social cohesion (Chan et al., 2006; Dragolov, Ignácz, Lorenz, Delhey, & Boehnke, 2013; Langer et al., 2017; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). This definition makes reference to so-called “generalised trust” and “institutional trust” (Fukuyama, 2010; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017; Zerfu, Zikhali, & Kabenga, 2009). The former is defined as the “ability to trust people outside one’s familiar or kinship circles” (Mattes & Moreno, 2018) and captures the horizontal dimension. Institutional trust, instead, is the trust towards “formal, legal organizations of government and state, as distinct from the current incumbents nested within those organizations” (Mattes & Moreno, 2018), and therefore captures the vertical level.

The third attribute is cooperation for the common good. A manifestation of high levels of social cohesion is that many people/groups cooperate for non-individualistic reasons, and more specifically for the commonly shared priorities of the larger collectivity (the “common good” (Fraenkel, 1968)). As with the other two attributes, cooperation is both between individuals/groups and between individuals/groups and the institutions.

3 Case study: the Tingathe Economic Empowerment Project

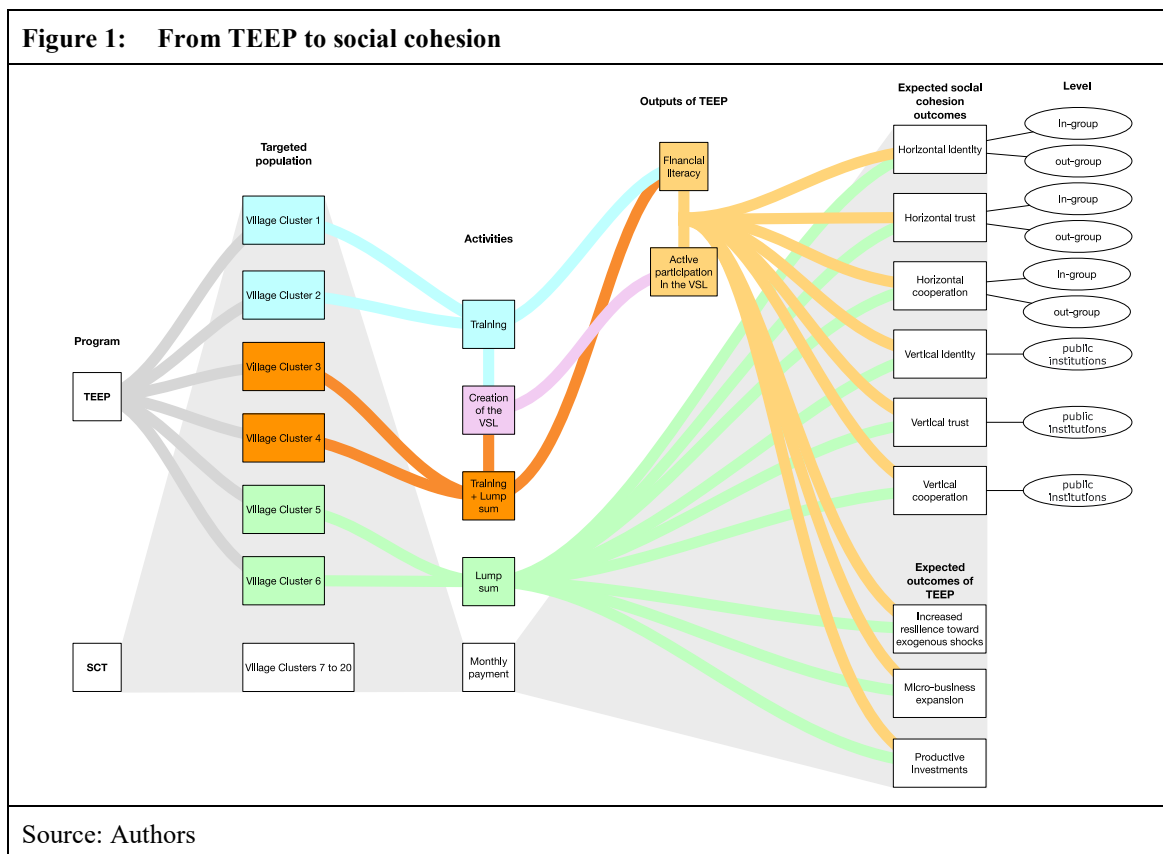
This paper analyses the TEEP, an integrated social protection programme that was implemented in 2016 by the Government of Malawi with the technical assistance of GIZ in the Malawian district of Mwanza. Beneficiaries of the TEEP were those who benefitted from the nation-wide SCT programme: households living in extreme poverty and with strong labour impediments. While the SCT provided them with a bimonthly payment of between USD 4 and USD 13, the TEEP provided a larger set of benefits, which varied depending on the village cluster in which they lived. The EEP reached six of the 20 village clusters of Mwanza and provided:⁴ (a) a one-time lump-sum payment equivalent to USD 70 to households in two village clusters; (b) a financial and business training to households in two village clusters; and (c) both the lump-sum and the training to households in two village clusters.

The design of the project was based on the idea that poverty is mostly due to a lack of capital for investments and poor information/knowledge. Though the households were free to decide

4 A village cluster is a group of villages located very close to one another. This classification was introduced for the administration of the SCT programme.

how to use the money, the expectation was that they would use the lump-sum to make productive investments to start or expand a micro-business activity, especially if the lump-sum were accompanied by business training. On the other hand, the training – provided by the COMSIP Cooperative Union – was meant to lead to the creation of VSL groups: the first phase of the training consisted of group formation and the second phase focused mainly on saving behaviours. Here the underlying idea was that, by pooling risks, people could gain access to loans to which they were previously excluded in the formal banking sector. By saving and having access to loans, people could smooth their consumption and better deal with shocks. The project aimed to place beneficiaries on a trajectory to exit poverty by enabling them to engage in a stable micro-business and improving their financial knowledge and practices.⁵

The project’s theory of change, as highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, did not focus on social cohesion. However, we do argue that this type of intervention can have an impact on different attributes of social cohesion. Figure 1 shows a simplified illustration of the channels through which the TEEP – and the SCT programme – could have affected social cohesion. SCT and TEEP targeting and activities are depicted from left to right in Figure 1. TEEP outputs are on the centre-right side of the figure, and the expected social cohesion outcomes are on the right.⁶



5 Following this rationale, as beneficiary households were labour constrained, the project offered them the option of choosing a proxy who would attend the training or engage in business activities on their behalf. Beneficiaries are thus viewed as potential entrepreneurs or investors.

6 It is important to stress that Figure 1 illustrates a theory of change and not an evaluation framework. Thus, it includes channels and outcomes that are not directly explored in this paper.

The channels indicated in the diagram were identified through the existing literature: both theoretical and empirical contributions were considered since the relevant empirical evidence is scarce. The horizontal dimension of social cohesion may be affected, positively or negatively, by a change in the level of cooperation at different stages (within groups and between groups within the village). The vertical dimension instead may be impacted, positively or negatively, by a change in trust in and identification of the various levels of institutions involved in the area (village, district, region, state). It is important to stress once more that for the six TEEP-recipient clusters, the targeting of the TEEP was the same as that of the SCT: in other words, in these clusters all the participants in the TEEP received the SCT, too. The opposite is not necessarily the case; in particular, SCT beneficiaries who were offered participation in the VSL groups may have declined. While the creation of the VSL groups is a project input (thus, exogenous), whether to participate in a VSL group – though incentivised – was ultimately a decision left to the targeted person (thus, participation is partially endogenous).

4 Quantitative analysis

4.1 Methodology

The clusters that benefited from the different components of the TEEP were selected randomly; within these clusters all those households that were already receiving the SCT were eligible for the TEEP. Given this setting, the quantitative assessment exploits an experimental design. The registry used by the SCT for the targeting of its beneficiaries was used as baseline. Then an extensive household survey was conducted in June-July 2017, about 12-13 months after the disbursement of the lump-sum. As a sampling strategy, 50 per cent of SCT households were randomly selected in each of the six “treated” clusters; 25 per cent of SCT households were, instead, randomly selected in each of the remaining 14 clusters of Mwanza, which formed the control group. To increase the power of the study, 10 clusters from the neighbouring district of Neno were also included in the control group; 25 per cent of those SCT households were also interviewed. In total, about 85 households belonged to each treatment arm and 530 belonged to the control group.⁷ Previous research shows that there are no systematic differences between the treatment groups and the control groups over a number of variables measured at the baseline, thus pointing to the effectiveness of the randomisation (Burchi & Strupat, 2018).

While the study by Burchi and Strupat (2018) looked at the impacts of the different project components on a large number of variables, the present study concentrates on outcomes related to social cohesion. The questionnaire indeed includes four questions in this area. The first asked interviewees to indicate to what extent they agreed with the following statement: “Most people in this village/neighbourhood are basically honest and can be trusted”. Answers ranged from “strongly disagree” (coded “1”) to “strongly agree” (coded “4”). The second question asked respondents whether at the time of the survey they trusted people in their village “less”, “about the same” or “more” than they had one year earlier (before implementation of the TEEP). The third question on social cohesion asked interviewees to

⁷ See Burchi and Strupat (2018) for further experimental design details.

indicate to what extent they agreed with the following sentence: “If I have a problem, there is always someone to help me”. Like for the first question answers ranged from “strongly disagree” (coded “1”) to “strongly agree” (coded “4”). The fourth question asked, “Do the majority of people in this village generally have good relationships with each other?”. Pre-coded answers were “no” (“0”), “sometimes” (“1”) and “yes” (“2”).

The first two questions refer to the attribute “trust” in the social cohesion definition provided in Section 2, while the third and fourth refer to the attribute “cooperation”. No direct question was posed with regard to the attribute “inclusive identity”.⁸ Moreover, all these attributes are analysed exclusively in the horizontal dimension. Thus, we cannot assess impacts on all the social cohesion outcomes illustrated in Figure 1.

Four outcome variables were initially generated from the above questions as ordinal variables. In addition, for the two questions with four potential answers we created dummy variables, taking value “0” if the respondent answered “strongly disagree” or “disagree” and value “1” if the answers were “agree” or “strongly agree”. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the four groups. The highest mean values are found either in the training-only group or in the lump-sum plus training group while the lowest mean value is always found either in the control group or in the lump-sum only group.

	Lump-sum plus training	Lump-sum only	Training only	Control group
Most village members can be trusted	3.128	2.952	2.988	2.858
Most village members can be trusted (yes/no)	0.814	0.679	0.814	0.696
Change in trust towards village members	2.093	2.071	2.256	2.111
Receives help when they have a problem	2.953	2.892	2.977	2.830
Receives help when they have a problem (yes/no)	0.732	0.666	0.837	0.677
Majority of village members have good relationships	2.430	2.273	2.488	2.330
Number of observations	86	84	86	530
Source: Authors				

To assess the impacts of the different components of the TEEP on the above dependent variables we employ the econometric strategy used in Burchi and Strupat (2018). Despite the randomisation, we control for household- and beneficiary-level variables measured at the baseline. The first group includes: number of children in primary school, number of able-bodied household members, housing conditions, asset wealth index and changes in household size between baseline and endline. The second group includes: age, sex, marital status, school attendance and whether they have a chronic illness or a disability.

⁸ This attribute has been, instead, investigated in depth in the qualitative analysis concerning the VSL groups (see Section 5).

The model includes three dummy variables indicating whether the household lives in the cluster that received only the lump-sum payment, in the cluster that received only the training or in the cluster that received both. The coefficients of these variables indicate the impacts of the different interventions. We estimate the intention-to-treat effects, that is, the effect of an offer to participate in the training, as the participation in the training is voluntary. Equation (1) represents the model estimated:

$$SC_{ihc} = LT_c\beta_1 + L_c\beta_2 + T_c\beta_3 + X_{ihc}\gamma + \varepsilon_{ihc} \quad (1)$$

where SC_{ihc} indicates the social cohesion outcome of interest derived from the endline survey for respondent i of household h residing in cluster c ; LT_c is a binary variable that indicates whether the cluster c received the lump-sum payment and the training component. L_c is a binary variable that shows if the cluster received just the lump-sum payment, while T_c is a binary variable that represents if the cluster received the training component. X_{ihc} represents the set of individual and household characteristics from the baseline survey described above, and ε_{ihc} is the standard error term. As we include all three indicators of the treatment arms, the coefficients of interest are β_1 , β_2 and β_3 , which indicate the impact of the respective treatment arm compared with the control group. Given the ordinal nature of the dependent variables, we used Poisson regressions. Finally, given that randomisation took place at the village cluster level, the estimates include standard errors clustered at the village cluster level.

4.2 Findings

Burchi and Strupat (2018) find that the different components of the TEEP had a positive impact on a number of dependent variables. In particular, they find that the addition of the financial and business training to the lump-sum payments generated important benefits in terms of investment in productive activities, employment opportunities, livestock ownership, food and overall consumption. On the other hand, lump-sum payments alone did not seem to generate significant improvements. Finally, the financial and business training – with or without the lump-sum – played a crucial role in increasing financial literacy, promoting savings and accessing loans.

Clearly, a general improvement in the wellbeing of the beneficiaries could improve social relationships among themselves as well as between them and the other village members. Moreover, if they perceived that the national and local institutions played a key role in the design and implementation of the TEEP this could also improve their feeling of belonging to, and their willingness to cooperate with, the state (vertical dimension). However, these effects are not straightforward. In particular, the different components may have different effects on social cohesion. Here we directly examine their impacts on the social cohesion indicators illustrated in Section 4.1 (see Table 2).

Some results are striking. Regardless of the specific indicators considered, households that received only the training experienced significantly higher social cohesion than households in the control group, whereas the differences between households receiving the lump-sum and those in the control group were never statistically significant. Finally, the group that received both interventions showed significantly higher trust towards village members than

the control group (see Table 2, Column 1); however, when the same dependent variable is dichotomised, the effect is no longer significant.

One possible interpretation is that the lump-sum, on the one hand, may improve social cohesion by ensuring productive inclusion and general wellbeing of the beneficiaries, but on the other hand, being a cash benefit, it may increase stigma and, thus, reduce social cohesion (Li & Walker, 2017; Roelen, 2017). This could explain the insignificant effects for the lump-sum only group. The training and participation in the VSL groups, instead, are a different form of intervention in which people have to participate actively, thus, it may improve the social status of the beneficiary – in addition to their financial and business knowledge and capacity – and, along these lines, improve social cohesion. Another possible interpretation is that, since training recipients are usually members of VSL groups, they had VSL group members mostly in mind when they answered these questions. Indeed, the literature shows that in the specific cases of the questions related to trust, respondents usually have in mind “people outside one’s familiar or kinship circles” (Mattes & Moreno, 2018).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Most village members can be trusted	Most village members can be trusted (no/yes)	Change in trust towards village members	Receives help when they have a problem	Receives help when they have a problem (no/yes)	Majority of village members have good relationships
Lump-sum plus training	0.268**	0.118	-0.004	0.122	0.045	0.120
	(0.113)	(0.076)	(0.122)	(0.184)	(0.083)	(0.144)
Lump-sum only	0.098	-0.019	-0.050	0.041	-0.023	-0.059
	(0.153)	(0.043)	(0.091)	(0.177)	(0.063)	(0.095)
Training only	0.150**	0.138**	0.131** *	0.180** *	0.201***	0.175***
	(0.067)	(0.061)	(0.048)	(0.062)	(0.035)	(0.041)
Control variables	X	X	X	X	X	X
Observations	786	786	786	786	786	786
Notes: Standard errors clustered at the village-cluster level in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 Source: Authors						

The interpretation of the estimates for the lump-sum plus training group is more complex. Coefficients are positive for five of the six outcomes and always higher than those for the lump-sum only group, but significant only for the first trust variable. In general, it seems that the positive effect of this combination of interventions on possible drivers of social cohesion (Burchi & Strupat, 2018) and the direct positive contribution of participation in training/VSL groups on the social cohesion outcomes is largely offset by the mild negative direct effect of the lump-sum transfer on the same outcomes (through increase of stigma).

To better understand the results above and verify the validity of our initial interpretations, we decided to dig more into the contribution of the VSL groups. In particular, we wanted to check whether it was mostly the participation in these structured groups that triggered the above results. In other words, we tried to disentangle the effect of the training from that of the participation in the VSL groups. We did so by re-running the same regressions as in Table 2, but for the training participants we focused only on those that joined the VSL groups either immediately after their creation through the TEEP or within one year. We are, however, aware that participation in the saving groups may actually be endogenous. By adding all the control variables at the baseline, we alleviate that problem, but the results should nevertheless be treated with caution and be considered only as indicative of the role of VSL groups.

The results on these sub-groups are presented in Table 3. Comparing them with the previous results, we notice that for the training-only groups the coefficients are always higher and in the case of the first two variables related to trust the impacts are now significant at the 1 per cent level and no longer only at the 5 per cent level. For the lump-sum plus training group we notice an increase in the magnitude and significance of the effect on the first trust variable; moreover, the coefficient is now statistically significant (at the 5 per cent level) on the dichotomised variable.

All these results point to a clear positive role of the VSL groups on social cohesion. In order to better comprehend the dynamics within these groups and their specific contribution to the different attributes of social cohesion, we carried out a qualitative analysis, which will be presented in the next section.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
VARIABLES	Most village members can be trusted	Most village members can be trusted (no/yes)	Change in trust towards village members	Receives help when they have a problem	Receives help when they have a problem (no/yes)	Majority of village members have good relationships
Lump-sum plus training	0.293*** (0.084)	0.121** (0.052)	0.003 (0.146)	0.120 (0.121)	0.058 (0.050)	0.111 (0.122)
Lump-sum only	0.088 (0.151)	-0.023 (0.044)	-0.050 (0.091)	0.032 (0.175)	-0.026 (0.064)	-0.065 (0.096)
Training only	0.205*** (0.054)	0.177*** (0.037)	0.179** *	0.221** *	0.215** *	0.218*** (0.043)
Control variables	X	X	X	X	X	X
Observations	734	734	734	734	734	734
Notes: Standard errors clustered at the village-cluster level in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1						
Source: Authors						

5 Qualitative analysis

As the TEEP was successful in the creation of VSL groups in 2016, the qualitative study of 2019 aimed to understand whether any activities of these groups affected mutual trust among the group members and led to the creation of group businesses or any form of non-economic cooperation. Both factors are important attributes of social cohesion in its horizontal dimension. This study consists of a qualitative survey including focus group activities and individual interviews in order to investigate the functioning and inclusiveness of these groups. The data collection was carried out between 24 September and 1 October 2019.

5.1 Methodology

The study involves all 10 VSL groups established by the TEEP in 2016 in the four clusters that received the training (two with the lump-sum and two without). Two main qualitative methods were employed: (1) a focus group activity involving open questions to the whole group and a participatory card game and (2) three individual interviews with pre-selected profiles of people.

These tools are employed to help understand the multiple aspects of social cohesion. Compared with the quantitative methodology, the qualitative methodology used here allows for analysis of the phenomenon from more and different angles. Focus groups can lead to deliberative debate with participants expressing their opinions and dissenting with each other. This process allows participants to make sense of their experiences, and, in interaction with others, modify them, leading to the construction of new knowledge (Dahlin Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Kitzinger, 1994). It represents a socially or culturally distinct understanding of the landscape and sheds some light on points that may have been missed in an individual interview.

During this first activity, we also carried out a card game, which is a participatory method based on the premise that local inhabitants possess expert knowledge of their local environments. In the empirical literature on the capability approach, card games have been used to assess people's capabilities and agency (Allen, Lambert, Ome, & Frediani, 2015; Frediani, Boni, & Gasper, 2014; Van Scoy et al., 2017). Card games have also been used to explore how participation in different forms of collective action – such as cooperatives and farm associations – influence the dimensions of life that people value (Burchi, De Muro, & Vicari, 2015; Burchi & Vicari, 2014; Vicari, 2014). To apply this method, 31 cards were initially drawn to indicate different aspects of the following three categories: feelings, institutions and economic activities. The aim of this exercise was to explore the three attributes of social cohesion (trust, identity and cooperation) under the horizontal and vertical dimensions. The cards were distributed to the members and discussed one by one under the guidance of a facilitator. Then, the group placed each card on a levelled board (from 1 to 10) according to their perception of the degree the problem/issue represented on the card was present in their life. As a last step, the group was asked to indicate which cards were more positively and negatively influenced by participation in the VSL group.

Individual interviews focused on some specific aspects of the VSL group activity and personal lifestyle, contributing with individual experiences to the evaluation of the project.

They also included questions on social cohesion in line with those mentioned in Section 4.1. The questions were

- Did you establish new personal contacts/friendships due to the VSL/saving group membership?
- Did you have any conflicts/issues with other VSL/saving group members?
- To what extent do you trust the other VSL group members?
- Do you trust the people inside your VSL/saving group more than other people in your village/community?
- Compared with three years ago, do you trust people in this village more, less or the same?
- Do you trust your district institutions, such as the local village development committee (VDC) and area executive committee (AEC)?^{9,10}

In each group, the three interviewees were selected based on the following criteria (where available):

- a member who obtained a conspicuous loan,
- a member with a problematic repayment history, and
- a member who took part in a collective economic activity or carried out a successful activity made possible by the loan.

The people corresponding to the above profiles were identified with the help of the group's secretary or treasurer. We managed to interview 22 members from nine VSL groups.¹¹ Given the limited sample size and the difference in the profiles of the respondents, a proper inference based on the data acquired through the interviews cannot be made.

5.2 Findings

About three years after the creation of the VSL groups, only five of the 10 groups were still active (see Table 4). This initial finding seems to provide a hint into the limitations of the TEEP – and in particular in the training component with the associated creation of VSL groups – to enhance social cohesion in the long term, and that bribes and conflicts probably led to this result. This intuitive argument only partially explains the reality. An in-depth investigation highlights how exogenous factors play a big role in the survival of the

9 A village development committee is a representative body from a group of villages responsible for identifying needs and facilitating planning and development in local communities. It is at this level that the communities raise their needs and demand projects. The VDC is composed by an elected board and directed by the group-village leader.

10 An area executive committee is composed of extension workers from both the Government and non-governmental organisations operating in the Traditional Area. This committee is the technical arm at the area level and is responsible for advising superior institutions on all aspects of development.

11 Moreover, only 14 are from VSL groups that are still active (see Section 5.2).

VSL groups and their impact on social cohesion. By “exogenous factors” we mean factors that are not themselves affected by the TEEP. The participating villages and southern Malawi in general are highly affected by the negative consequences of climate change. At the beginning of 2017, Mwanza was hit by major floods followed by a drought that affected the lives of the poor by destroying their houses, reducing agricultural production and raising food prices (FEWS NET, 2018a, 2018b; WorldWeatherOnline.com, 2020).

Moreover, since 2017, there have been several suspensions or delays in the disbursement of the SCT. As the SCT is conventionally paid every two months, a missed instalment implies a four-month period without these transfers. Though at the end of the suspension SCT beneficiaries receive all the backlogs, not being able to access the (expected) social transfers for so long may have a major impact on the lives of people living in extreme poverty, especially in periods of climate shock. That is what happened in 2017: the extreme weather conditions followed by two missed payments between March and June reduced the resilience of the vulnerable beneficiaries and consequently that of their VSL groups. This is confirmed by the fact that two groups closed their activities for lack of money right at the end of 2017.

Only sporadic cases of internal conflicts within the VSL groups were reported for the period of more than three years. Two of them arose due to stealing accusations – one was confirmed by the accused person – while the other three developed from problems in repayment. With the exception of one single case, all these conflicts happened between 2017 and the beginning of 2018.

Interestingly, the VSL groups that ceased their activities between 2017 and the beginning of 2018 were all located in the clusters characterised by higher socio-economic and climatic vulnerability.¹² Indeed, despite being exposed to the same external shocks, none of the four groups located in the two better-off clusters closed, while five of the six groups located in the worse-off clusters did close. This means that the interactions of the adverse exogenous conditions/shocks led to the closure of the groups: two due to lack of money (no conflicts were reported here), and three due to conflicts that probably emerged from the economic stress.

Of course, endogenous factors are important, too. They entail programme-specific aspects such as the VSL group design and the typology and frequency of training. In one case in particular, the fact that the group was composed of members of two different villages caused feelings of jealousy related to the holding of the physical money and the roles/tasks inside the group. Another aspect underlined by many interviewees from different groups was that the lack of follow-up by COMSIP – the cooperative that provided the training – could have been one of the reasons for the definite ceasing of the activities of many groups between 2017 and 2018.

For VSL groups that successfully overcame the climatic and economic struggles of 2017 and did not experience conflicts caused by illicit actions, trust among the group members increased. This was confirmed by the focus group activities and by all the interviewees from

¹² The source of this information is a small survey conducted in October and November 2015, when we collected data on the 10 different clusters involved in the TEEP. Based on this information, for the four training receiving clusters, we find that two were significantly better off than the other two, especially in terms of distance from the main road of Mwanza, presence of trading centres and climatic conditions.

the active VSL groups. Group identity and in-group trust and cooperation were both drivers and outcomes of survival and resilience of the VSL groups. As an example, in one VSL group, the treasurer's home was robbed and the group lost a huge amount of money; despite this, everyone asked the treasurer to keep working for the group and the next year they re-started all the activities from nothing.

Group identity was strong in most of the groups. Both the focus group activity and the interviews clearly showed that members of the VSL groups trusted each other more than the rest of the village. They also appreciated the "social" value of the group thanks to which they made new friendships, but, above all, they highly valued the common, exclusive training they received, which was viewed as a fundamental bond among group members and which contributed to the development a "common language" (Kilpatrick, Bell, & Falk, 1999). Last but not least, respondents also reported that their joint experiences and shared struggles over more than three years strengthened their identity as a group.

The members of the well-performing VSL groups saw themselves on a path of "graduation" out of dependence on external assistance and out of poverty. In one case, the group cooperation led to the creation of a group business, which proved to be sustainable over time:¹³ a cassava farm that involved eight members and was established in 2016. However, cooperation among the members was appreciable also in other aspects of the VSL group life, such as many business interactions, the exchange of help in individual businesses and the tolerance with which late repayment was accepted if justified by important external factors.

As TEEP participants were also members of other VSL groups not promoted by TEEP, we asked which group they trusted more. In all eight VSL groups where we gathered this information the interviewees considered the members of the TEEP VSL groups more trustworthy and reliable, having received a complete, common training. Finally, when asked if they would have actively participated in the VSL groups even without the lump-sum, all the interviewees that received both lump-sum and training answered positively, stressing that the training was really important for their life while the lump-sum did not bring major long-term benefits.

When inquiring if the level of trust towards the village (horizontal, out-group trust) changed compared with three years before – the period before the establishment of the VSL group – we did not find a clear pattern of answers. However, once we consider only VSL groups that are still open, we find that almost 43 per cent of the interviewees (six people) felt that it worsened, 28.5 per cent (four people) felt that was the same and 28.5 felt that it improved. Finally, 60 per cent of the interviewees (71 per cent in VSL groups that were still open) trusted their group more than they trusted the rest of the village.

While caution should be used in interpreting these findings due to the very small sample, an in-depth exploration of this important issue revealed a widely shared view of the motivations: people reported jealousy and incomprehension within their communities due to their receipt of the SCT. In any case, these feelings – real or only perceived – were not directly related to the TEEP, but to the intervention on top of which the TEEP was built,

13 Motivated by the training, all VSL groups managed to start at least one group activity during their lifespan, but most were ultimately unsuccessful.

namely the SCT. This is confirmed by the interviewees' admission that the situation was even worse in the periods in which they were waiting for a big amount of money to make up for the SCT suspensions. It must be noted that, in order to minimise the reporting bias, we did not ask directly about pre- and post-TEEP, but simply that respondents compare the current level of trust with what they felt three years earlier. Bringing the interviewees back to three years earlier proved to be difficult, as often happens with retrospective questions (Blome & Augustin, 2015). Further discussion revealed clearly that the respondents had in mind 2014 – when the SCT started in Mwanza – as “baseline”.

Respondents reported low trust towards local institutions (vertical trust), in particular the VDC: 54 per cent of the interviewees reported not trusting it. The AEC, a higher-ranking institution than the VDC, was not trusted by a much lower share (25 per cent) of the interviewees. The reasons for the distrust emerged clearly during the discussions with almost all the groups. The interviewees reported being discriminated against by the institutions in terms of access to other development interventions because they were already benefiting from the SCT. Being the VDC in charge of the targeting and facilitation of development programmes in the local communities, the perceived discrimination in the access to these programmes seems the most plausible reason for this discrepancy. Another, less important reason is that the interviewees did not know the AEC well: 22 per cent reported they were not aware of the activities of this institution and for this reason they trusted it more. While we do not have enough information to verify whether this discrimination really took place, the repeated messages received during focus group discussions and interviews as well as previous studies (Ansell, van Blerk, Robson, Hajdu, Mwachungu, Hlabana, & Hemsteede, 2019) indicate that this is plausible.

Even though this was not explicitly discussed during the focus groups and the interviews, through a direct observation of group dynamics, we arrived at the conclusion that the common feeling of jealousy by the rest of the village and discrimination by some local institutions had probably contributed to the strengthening of group identity mentioned before. This would also be in line with the findings of other studies focusing on group dynamics that reveal that discriminated groups are more united (Stronge, Sengupta, Barlow, Osborne, Houkamau, & Sibley, 2016; Vargas, Sanchez, & Valdez, 2017).

In one of the two VSL groups in which there was no perception of discrimination, the members fully trusted both the AEC and the VDC, and it was stressed that the VSL brought unity in the village. In the other VSL group, the VDC had recently changed, so they were still unsure of whether to trust it or not. There was a third group that fully trusted both the local institutions and in which there was no mention of any kind of discrimination.¹⁴

Finally, a generally acknowledged precondition for a cohesive community is a good relationship between the genders. Only a small proportion of TEEP beneficiaries were men (Beierl, Burchi, & Strupat, 2017), thus they made up a relatively small share of VSL

14 One hypothesis for this finding is that different VDCs simply behave differently. An analysis of the quantitative data collected in 2017 provides a small empirical support of this: some members of the two groups that had some trust in the local institutions had access to other development programmes, in particular the emergency food assistance managed by the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee, while in the other groups no one had access to them.

groups.¹⁵ It is worth highlighting that no tension between genders was reported within any group. All female members claimed they received full support from their husbands regarding their participation in the VSL group, and, in many cases, the husbands contributed to the repayment. Only in two groups were some husbands defined as sceptical at the beginning, but after the training the women were able to explain to them the power of the VSL group. They changed their minds fully when they saw that they had money even in the most difficult periods.

15 The SCT (and thus the TEEP) did not explicitly target women (as many other cash transfers do). However, the criteria used to target households – being ultra-poor and labour constrained – led to the inclusion of mostly female-headed households.

Table 4: Profile and activities of the VSL groups										
Intervention	Training and lump-sum		Training		Training and lump-sum			Training		
VSL #	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Current # (initial #)	27 (33)	23 (41)	7 (39)	48 (48)	17 (17)	0 (27)	40 (41)	0 (31)	0 (27)	0 (24)
Number of villages	1	1	1	3	>1	1	1	3	2	1
Meeting frequency	weekly	weekly	biweekly	biweekly	biweekly	biweekly	biweekly	biweekly	weekly	weekly
Collective activity	yes	external organisation	only for one year	planning	only for one year	no	external organisation	external organisation	only for one year	external organisation
Conflict	no	no	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Last meeting	.	July 2019	.	.	Dec 2017	Apr 2017	Jan 2019	Dec 2017	Dec 2017	Dec 2017
Shared out (closed)	no	no ⁱ	no	no	no ⁱⁱ	May 2018	no	Dec 2017 ⁱⁱⁱ	Dec 2017	Dec 2017
<p>Notes:</p> <p>i The group is on standby, waiting for SCT to restart.</p> <p>ii The group stopped meeting in December 2017, but 11 loans are still out and they did not share out.</p> <p>iii Twelve members from the same village are willing to restart the VSL group.</p> <p>Source: Authors</p>										

6 Conclusions

6.1 Findings

Social protection is a key tool for reducing poverty and food insecurity, but there are good arguments to support the idea that it can also contribute to more complex outcomes, such as social cohesion. This paper has examined the effects of the TEEP – an integrated social protection programme – on three key pillars of social cohesion, namely trust, social identity and cooperation. The TEEP offers three different sets of services to three groups of beneficiaries: a lump-sum transfer, a financial training connected to the creation of VSL groups, and a combination of both. The impact assessment was carried out through a sequential mixed-methods approach: a quantitative analysis based on an experimental design and primary data collected one year after project implementation was followed by a qualitative analysis, consisting of focus group discussions and individual interviews conducted more than three years after project implementation.

This study reveals that the lump-sum does not seem to have a concrete effect on social cohesion outcomes. Indeed, the quantitative analysis shows that there is no significant difference between the group that received only the lump-sum transfer and the “control” group in terms of a set of variables reflecting trust and cooperation among individuals. Also, in the qualitative interviews the value added of receiving extra cash in terms of group relationships did not emerge. One possible reason is that the transfer size is not big enough to influence social cohesion: however, it should be pointed out that the lump-sum payment is almost double the average amount of SCT received by a household within one year (The Transfer Project, 2017) and equivalent to about 58 per cent of the 2013 annual national poverty line in Malawi and 94 per cent of the food poverty line (Burchi & Strupat, 2018).

The comprehensive training – composed of group formation, financial training and micro-business training – did make a difference for social cohesion. The quantitative analysis clearly shows that all indicators of trust and cooperation are significantly and substantially higher in the group that participated in the training as compared with both the control group and the group that benefited only from the lump-sum. Moreover, an analysis on a sub-group of training participants that also joined the VSL groups highlights an even larger effect, hinting at the possible value added of participating in these groups in terms of social cohesion. For this reason, we conducted the qualitative study, which confirmed the importance of being part of these groups. High within-group trust was detected in almost all the VSL groups examined and the common experience of participating in a training that they regarded as very valuable was viewed as a key factor for that. At the same time, different forms of cooperation between members of the same VSL group were activated for economic and non-economic purposes.

However, the VSL group activities did not reach the above results when major external shocks hit them – in particular, the 2017 extreme weather conditions – especially for those located in clusters characterised by higher socio-economic and climatic vulnerability. Also some specific features of the project design hindered social cohesion: the inclusion of two villages in the same VSL group led to internal conflicts concerning the management of the savings and may have even exacerbated the tensions between the two villages.

Another important finding of the study, which emerged only from the qualitative analysis, is that the members of the VSL groups felt in the vast majority of the cases discriminated against by the local institutions and treated with jealousy by other village members. In particular, it was repeated that they felt excluded from other development interventions by the VDC because they were receiving the SCT. As a consequence, their trust towards the VDC declined (vertical trust), while their trust towards other village members (horizontal, out-group trust) is reported with a contrasting pattern of answers. It is important, however, to specify that this reduction of social cohesion is not directly related to the TEEP analysed in this paper, but to the SCT programme on whose infrastructure the TEEP rested. We cannot make any claim regarding the specific impact of the participation in training/VSL groups on the social relationships between group members and the rest of the community.

Though not directly concerning the TEEP, the above finding is interesting as it speaks to the general debate on the relationship between cash benefit programmes and social cohesion and especially in two sub-debates. First, poverty-related targeted cash benefit schemes may create tensions between those excluded from and those included in the programmes, especially if the former feel they have the same (poor) economic conditions as the latter (Adato et al., 2000; Adato & Roopnaraine, 2004; Roelen, 2017). This is especially the case when the targeting criteria are not adequately communicated or there are clear pitfalls in their operationalisation (Molyneux, Jones, & Samuels, 2016), which was detected in the case of the SCT in Malawi (Ansell et al., 2019).¹⁶ Second, the clear involvement of the community in the targeting of final beneficiaries has advantages and disadvantages, and whether the former prevail on the latter or vice versa depends especially on local institutional arrangements. Some programmes rely heavily on communities to identify the beneficiaries, while others do not use this channel at all. The SCT in Malawi is situated somewhere in the middle: communities are consulted for a final adjustment of the list of beneficiaries.

A general remark is necessary. As all interviewees for both the quantitative and the qualitative analysis (including the control group in the former) received the cash transfer, we cannot say what the impact of the TEEP components on social cohesion would be without this other scheme. In particular, in an attempt to expand or replicate a programme like TEEP in contexts where no cash transfer is active, it would be necessary to understand whether the participants in the training and VSL groups would be able to have enough savings to actively contribute to group activities and, through that channel, enhance social cohesion. Based on the experience of the extreme weather conditions and SCT suspension of 2017, when many groups ceased the activities and/or suffered conflicts, we believe there would be some difficulties.

Another limitation of the analysis is that it cannot take into account all the different aspects of the complex concept of social cohesion. In particular, the quantitative analysis concentrates only on the horizontal dimension and on two of the three attributes: trust and

16 The study by Ansell et al. (2019) indicates that the targeting of the SCT programme in Malawi has important flaws. This is due first of all to the focus on the household as a unit of analysis: households are assumed to be stable entities, while instead in the Malawian context they are dynamic, with the household structure changing continuously. The second reason is the complexity of the eligibility criteria (being ultra-poor and labour constrained). Because of this, several community members perceived the targeting as arbitrary and the beneficiaries as “lucky”.

cooperation, thus, leaving out inclusive identity. The qualitative analysis, instead, tries to sort out the relationship between the VSL groups and all the attributes and dimensions of social cohesion, but once more focuses predominantly on the horizontal dimension. Finally, for the reasons explained in Section 5.2, focus groups and interviews provide better evidence for the within-VSL-group social cohesion than for the level of social cohesion between members of these groups and the rest of the village.

6.2 Policy implications

Some relevant policy implications can be drawn from this paper. First, at the risk of generalising, money does not necessarily increase social cohesion. To the contrary, when targeted cash benefit programmes are not adequately designed and implemented, paying major attention to issues such as the targeting and the regularity of the payments (for SCTs) (Burchi & Strupat, 2018; UNICEF-ESARO/Transfer Project, 2015), they can reduce social cohesion. Therefore, policy-makers aiming to expand social cohesion should be aware of the possible limitations of just giving cash, especially large amounts of money provided in one single instalment.

Second, another important policy lesson is that VSL groups – already widespread in Malawi for the middle class – can work for the poor, too. There is, however, a need for longer-term support from external agencies/organisations. Indeed, interviewees themselves stated that with more support from the cooperative COMSIP some groups that closed at the end of 2017 may have re-started their activities. Interviewees also clearly highlighted the importance of follow-up training to retain the skills/knowledge acquired earlier.

Finally, in the elaboration of possible ways to further exploit the social-cohesion-enhancing potential of the VSL groups, a development dilemma emerges. Is it advisable to open the VSL groups generated through the TEEP to other people, meaning those who do not receive the SCT and/or people not trained by TEEP? On the one hand, this may be viewed as a way to smooth out the contrasts between current members and non-members and expand social cohesion for a wider population. Moreover, it could avoid the creation of several identities that risk being in opposition to one another. On the other hand, increasing the heterogeneity of the group may generate the opposite effect if not properly managed (Mkpado, Idu, & Arene, 2010; Zeller, 1998): within-group cohesion may indeed decline and, thus, overall social cohesion. Two pieces of information seem to confirm this in the case of the TEEP. First, all members of the COMSIP VSL groups highly valued the common training they all received together and saw it as a key bonding factor. This also led them to declare that they preferred these groups to other VSL groups in which they were often included. To overcome this, a new project could consider training a larger part of the population, but this may be financially unsustainable. Second, as highlighted earlier, in one of the very few cases where a COMSIP VSL group included people from two different villages, there were increased conflicts. While a careful design and implementation of the project may minimise these negative effects, in some cases this may be very difficult.

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