



EVALUATION SUMMARY

Evaluation of the Pilot MEND and RISE Cash Transfer Programmes in St. Kitts and Nevis

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Background

St. Kitts and Nevis (SKN) is a twin-island Federation in the Eastern Caribbean. It has a total population of 47,195, with 34,948 in St. Kitts and 12,277 in Nevis.¹ The country ranked 77 among 188 countries and territories in the 2015 Human Development Report.² Gross national income (GNI) per capita of US\$14,490 classifies the country as a high-income economy according to the World Bank methodology. Real gross domestic product (GDP) growth was largely negative between 2009 and 2012, but it significantly increased from 2013 onwards to be regarded as one of the strongest in the region.

Although SKN is considered one of the most prosperous countries in the Eastern Caribbean, poverty has been a major concern since even before the 2008 financial crisis. It mainly affects at-risk social groups, particularly single mothers and children. Not only are many of the indigent and poor households headed by single mothers but also children comprise nearly 51.6 per cent of the poor population.³

As part of the National Poverty Reduction Strategy, the Government launched two pilot cash transfer programmes to assist indigent and poor families. **MEND (Mould, Empower, Nurture, Direct)** was implemented from September 2013 in St. Kitts, and **RISE (Restore, Inspire, Secure, Empower)** started in September 2014 in Nevis. The programmes aimed to help families become more resilient and break the cycle of poverty by investing in human capital development and connecting them to a wide range of social services.

Initial prioritization criteria established the targeting of children, the elderly, people with disabilities and pregnant women and involved 21 households (approx. 104 individuals) under the MEND pilot in St. Kitts (concluded in April 2016) and 7 households under RISE in Nevis (concluded in September 2016). However, there was no formal method for selecting households where a proxy means test was established and a ranking of priorities was developed. In fact, beneficiary families were chosen on a 'first come, first served' basis. The initial group was small because both MEND and RISE were pilot programmes under the then recently developed National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS).

¹ Department of Statistics 2012.

² UNDP 2016.

³ OECS Commission and UNICEF 2017.

Evaluation scope and methodology

This evaluation looked at both the implementation process and the results achieved with the aim of providing the Ministry of Community Development, Gender Affairs and Social Services (MCDGASS) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) with the necessary information for scaling up the MEND/RISE programmes. It investigated the programmes in the dimensions of relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability.

The utilization-focused approach was used, and human rights and gender equality dimensions were incorporated throughout the evaluation process. A combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods was adopted. The evaluation involved a survey with beneficiary families, a cost-benefit analysis (CBA) to address the viability of a scale-up of the programmes and semi-structured interviews and focus groups with officers and beneficiary women, children and youth to assess results achieved and collect lessons learned from implementation.

Gender equality

In both MEND and RISE, women played a central role as cash transfer recipients and as focal points of programme activities. The programmes remained mindful of power dynamics within the home, providing counselling and opportunities that empowered mothers in all aspects of their lives.

Findings

Relevance

Both programmes effectively promoted a multidimensional approach to poverty reduction that maximized the complementarity of their pillars: identification, family dynamics, health and wellness, education, housing, employment and income, and family safety. The cash transfer was complemented by a number of services: psychosocial support, health assistance, counselling at school, assistance on accessing housing policies, and courses related to employment and disaster preparedness.

The programmes were seen as relevant and timely at their inception. Today, this perception is mixed. On the one hand, there is a sense among upper management that target groups should either receive simple, unconditional cash transfers or benefit from other existing services. On the other hand, there is broad consensus from the beneficiaries’ side about the programmes’ relevance and a view that they should continue. However, the programmes fell short of serving their potential target population, considering they were pilots and benefited only 28 families.

With respect to the well-being of children, the programmes are clearly relevant. For youth and children interviewed, there is a positive evaluation of the retreats organized; and, in Nevis, a favourable impression of counselling services offered to RISE school children.

Effectiveness

A strong feature of both programmes as reported by the beneficiaries was psychosocial support. It helped to identify families' individual needs, refer them to the public services available and give them some degree of comfort in moments of increased stress.

Families learned basics of financial management and savings for the long term. Whereas RISE explicitly encouraged families to save, MEND placed greater emphasis on budgeting and rational spending.

A total of 19 out of 20 families interviewed reported that because of participation in the programme, they felt more confident to maintain a peaceful family environment in which everyone could work together. Most interviewees also agreed that, because of their participation, they felt better able to incorporate healthy habits and practices into their family routines.

There was not a significant impact identified in terms of employment of beneficiaries via the programme, although there are more heads of household employed now than in the beginning. This may have been due to less than ideal collaboration between the MCDGASS and Ministry of Labour as job training did not specifically target MEND and RISE beneficiaries; however, employment was one of the pillars of the programmes and positions were offered to all heads of household who wanted to work. There was a mandatory job search, if unemployed, for those receiving assistance.

Housing was also an important part of the programmes in terms of demands from beneficiaries. The poorest clients were prioritized in accessing government-subsidized housing and indeed received this benefit, with timely mortgage payments made viable by the financial education they received.

In terms of educational goals, RISE stands out for having created synergies between the education and social protection teams that resulted in greater parental involvement and school retention.

Some families had trouble complying with co-responsibilities. Among these, those with chronic vulnerabilities such as mental disability and addiction stand out. Caseworkers report that such families require specialized counselling in addition to the standard orientation activities prescribed in the programme manuals.



Efficiency

Even though both programmes were well targeted, the selection of families did not follow a systematic protocol due to absence at the time of a complete household registry. For a scale-up, the application of proxy means testing based on household registry data would be in order, in particular because implementation costs have already been absorbed by its integration into the National Household Registry.

Timeliness of cash transfers is a point of concern. Whereas payments were made regularly, the exact days of the month varied. Some families reported not knowing when or whether the funds would be credited, and others mention being embarrassed at checkout when their purchases were denied. Predictability of income is a fundamental feature of a household budget, and it should be assured by a more structured disbursement scheme on the part of the programmes

A critical issue for both programmes has been staffing, management structure and clarity in terms of procedures and protocols, reporting and workflow. Programme manuals were not detailed enough and training sessions were shorter than would have been desirable, by all accounts. No additional staff were hired specifically for MEND/RISE. While deploying the existing management structure and personnel allowed for the rapid integration of extant social services into the programmes without accruing major costs, human resources were under-equipped and over-stretched in both programmes. Investments in institutional strengthening, including training and documentation, are critical if they are to be scaled up.

Although practices could have been enhanced by each other's experiences, there was a lack of synergy between the St. Kitts and Nevis administrations. The programmes could also enhance their efficiency by promoting high-level dialogue among different ministries and defining protocols for local civil servants. As these were not in place, there was much negotiation and several individual agreements instead of systemic arrangements.

Communication is also an area with much potential for improvement. Families often did not know whom to refer to for social services, and social workers did not always have the information to provide to the families.



Impact

For every \$1,000⁴ dollars invested, \$720–\$740 were saved by the economic benefits afforded to participant families. That is to say, the real financial ‘cost’ of the programmes is the remaining \$260–\$280. If it were a financial investment, it would have a negative yield. But a payback of 72 to 74 per cent is quite remarkable considering that social programmes are not designed to produce positive financial returns.

Sustainability

The evaluation of MEND and RISE brought evidence of sustainable results of the programmes for the families in terms of changes in family dynamics, budget management, self-esteem, housing conditions, school performance and healthy habits. However, it also showed that little structure was created to help sustain the programmes over time.

While the buy-in from the beneficiaries was significant, the buy-in from the service providers was mixed. There was high-level engagement of other ministries in the beginning of the process, but it did not follow through.

With their multidimensional approach and proven ability to engage families, MEND and RISE could help innovate social policy. For that to happen, however, the Government would need to strengthen and streamline its overall approach to social protection and ensure greater coordination within the social sector.



⁴ Eastern Caribbean Dollars



Conclusions

- Families were noticeably empowered as a result of participation in MEND and RISE, where individual initiative and active collaboration were encouraged. Positive changes of behaviour identified in the survey for the majority of families in all pillars attest to the lasting impact of this empowerment strategy.
- A strong feature of both programmes was the psychosocial assistance provided to the families, which helped identify their individual needs and tailor the assistance, a feature not often present in larger programmes. Thus scaling up may create a cost challenge considering the low ratio of caseworkers to families required for this kind of assistance.
- The retreats/workshops helped to increase the self-esteem of the families, gave guidance on how to improve parenting, budgeting, schooling, health and housing, and introduced a motivational factor that fostered behaviour change. The additional counselling provided to RISE children in Nevis schools also brought a positive impact in terms of self-confidence.
- In terms of impacts on financial stability, budget preparation for the household was a widely-praised practice. Most families not only created a budget during the programmes but also continued to use this after it ended.
- Most households interviewed reported that because of participation in the programme, they felt they were better able to incorporate healthy habits/practices within the home. Uptake of healthy habits has been high by means of visits to health services and nutritional awareness. The beneficiaries also had access to local produce and harvested from a garden in their backyards. This was a major programme success, particularly in St. Kitts.



- In terms of education, there were distinct differences between the RISE and MEND programmes, where in RISE there was a closer collaboration between social services and education. Both programmes could benefit from improving collaboration and fostering learning in different dimensions of their work.

- Within the employment pillar, there was limited impact attributed to the programme. This may have been because trainings did not specifically target the high-vulnerability profile of MEND and RISE beneficiaries.

- The more vulnerable families received housing assistance and the less vulnerable who paid rent or a mortgage benefited from systematic savings resulting from financial education. Attention should be paid to possible conflicts with eligible families outside the programmes if MEND/RISE clients are prioritized, and formal eligibility criteria are advised.

- Careful casework resulted in identifying older children who were able to assist in budget planning, household chores and school attendance, especially in families with illiterate parents. Care should be taken not to overload children and young people with such tasks, especially if these detract from their leisure and study time.

- In the MEND case, the executive team as well as the beneficiary families felt the need for a programme completion ceremony to highlight the gains made by families and give a sense of closure.

- The programmes gave monetary assistance to the families through debit cards, which proved very effective in reducing stigma and facilitating the use of funds.

Some of the beneficiary households reported that co-responsibilities were difficult to comply with and tasks were time consuming. Nonetheless, families were largely engaged with the tasks proposed.

Recommendations

Area	Target	Priority	Recommendation	Rationale
Policy	Government and UNICEF	1	Update the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) with the involvement of civil society and think tanks in the country, strengthen and streamline coordination of social protection programmes and consider establishing a social protection floor.	The 'policy arena' of social protection in the country would benefit from involving other actors, fostering knowledge and raising awareness to help with policy consistency over time. Inter-ministerial coordination is also a must considering the diversity of programmes and ministries involved.
Implementation	Government	1	Establish protocols and more systematic management procedures with information systems to help with gains in efficiency.	Families often did not know who to refer to for social services, and social workers did not always have the information to provide to the families. If the programmes are to scale up, investments in the management structure will be needed.
Implementation	Government	1	Design a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system for scale up.	There was no M&E system in place for the management of the programme, with clear goals, indicators, data systems and protocols. This will be necessary as the programmes scale up so that bottlenecks are identified and results assessed.
Implementation	Government	2	Promote high-level dialogue and coordination within and among different ministries engaged in delivering social protection programmes as well as with Health and Education and strengthen inter-sectoral coordination.	<p>Inter-sectoral coordination in social protection was less than adequate despite MEND/RISE pilots being opportunities for improving it.</p> <p>There was much negotiation and several individual agreements instead of systemic arrangements.</p> <p>The programmes envisioned partnerships with the various departments and ministries of the pillars involved, and the governance structure of the programmes had an inter-ministerial committee that met only twice at the beginning of the pilots. There was high-level engagement initially, but it did not follow through. There should also be stronger integration with the gender department to ensure an equity focus from a gender standpoint.</p>
Design	Government	1	Provide counselling and special support for children and youth in schools from beneficiary households across the country in the framework of the programme.	There is demand from parents in the programmes for further assistance to be provided to children and youth who are at risk of being involved in crime and drug addiction. The successful experience in Nevis of providing counselling to children could be learnt from.

Area	Target	Priority	Recommendation	Rationale
Design	Government	2	Differentiate benefits according to the vulnerability of the household (single women, number of children, etc.) in an integrated strategy of social protection, where various programmes address different target groups and offer benefits according to their specific needs.	Beneficiary households are not a homogenous group. They have distinct levels of vulnerability. The differentiation of benefits within an integrated strategy involving the various ministries and agencies would have the potential of increasing impact. NOTE OF CAUTION: Increasing design complexity places more pressure on implementation.
Design	Government	1	Design an exit strategy so that families that graduate from the programmes can have a sustainable route out of poverty.	Since the programmes aim to reduce or eliminate intergenerational poverty, a prognostic analysis is necessary. Graduating families' cases should be critically assessed after the programme's end to determine the likelihood of their lapsing into poverty. Referrals to existing social protection services should be made, if applicable.
Coordination	Government	1	Enhance coordination between programme administrations on both islands.	There was a lack of synergy between the St. Kitts' and Nevis' administrations, and practices could have been enhanced by more frequent information sharing.
Design	Government	1	Use the proxy means testing built into the National Household Registry for identifying potential beneficiaries for both MEND/RISE scale up and targeting social protections services.	The selection of families did not follow a clear protocol of signing up for the programme, inserting the data in a system and creating a scale of prioritization for the families according to their needs. It will be difficult to manage the programmes and to prevent mistakes in targeting if they are scaled up.
Implementation	Government	1	Invest in caseworker capacity-building and quality service delivery.	Even though some training was provided to social workers, increased scale and complexity will require further preparation of caseworkers, considering the level of vulnerability of the beneficiaries.
Design	Government	2	Reinforce linkages of the programmes with housing policies.	Housing was a priority for beneficiaries and had a high impact on the quality of life and self-esteem of the families.
Implementation	Government	2	Implement partnerships with communities/organizations to provide extra-curricular programmes to assist beneficiary families.	The programmes should be able to identify other services, beyond governmental services, and refer the families to them. The programmes also need to be developed with formal partnerships in place.
Implementation	Government	2	Communicate better with families about co-responsibilities and about the calendar of cash disbursement and amounts made available.	Families were not aware of the disbursement calendar, which led to embarrassment among beneficiary families when using the debit card and unused cash at the end of the programmes. The overall management of the programmes need to be improved if scale-up is considered

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