



USE OF CASH AND VOUCHER ASSISTANCE FOR THE WELLBEING OF ADOLESCENT BOYS AND GIRLS IN CRISIS

Desk Review – Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

Adolescents – young people between the ages of 10 and 19 – have specific needs that are distinct from those of younger children and adults. This transitional and developmental period is increasingly seen as an “age of opportunity”¹ globally and in humanitarian settings, because of the significant individual and intergenerational implications of adolescent development.

During crises, the institutions, systems and community cohesion that normally support adolescent development break down. As a result, adolescents’ development into adulthood is accelerated, and they are forced to take on greater risks and responsibilities. Humanitarian response often fails to take the necessary steps to mitigate and counteract the disadvantages that adolescent girls and boys in crisis face – including access to education and livelihoods opportunities – and the challenges faced by, in particular, adolescent girls and adolescents with disabilities. Adolescent girls and boys face age-specific risks of violence that are often not adequately addressed compared with protection risks faced by women and younger children.

Cash and voucher assistance (CVA) – giving beneficiaries cash or vouchers as an alternative to in-kind assistance such as food, blankets and direct services – is used increasingly in humanitarian settings. While CVA shows promise for addressing adolescents’ needs, a more comprehensive understanding of the

impact of CVA on the protection and wellbeing of adolescents is critical. In particular, evidence is needed on how CVA should best be designed to draw on the assets and capacities of adolescents and ensure that any context-specific associated risks for adolescents can be mitigated through program design.

In 2019 and 2020, the Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC), on behalf of Plan International (Plan) and with support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), reviewed literature and documents that described CVA programming which reached adolescents to collate and document existing programs that deliver CVA for adolescent wellbeing outcomes. WRC also reviewed recent evidence and effective practices related to adolescent-focused programming from the child protection, health and education sectors that can be applied to the use of CVA programming for adolescent wellbeing outcomes, and carried out consultations with global practitioners whose organisations provide services to adolescents in crisis.

In all, WRC reviewed 72 pieces of literature, including academic journal articles, white papers, agency reports, guidance, blog posts and theses. In addition, 14 experts in child protection, education, CVA and adolescents were interviewed.

1. UNFPA. 2014. “The power of 1.8 billion: Adolescents, youth, and the transformation of the future.” State of world population 2014. New York: UNFPA.

KEY FINDINGS

The desk review and stakeholder consultations revealed that humanitarian actors are increasingly aware of adolescents in humanitarian response and of their role in accountability to adolescents, including in programming that uses CVA. Some humanitarian programs using CVA are reaching adolescents in crisis, either by transferring cash to adolescents' caregivers or, less frequently, transferring CVA directly to adolescents themselves. However, data is insufficiently disaggregated for adolescent age groups and this merits attention and improvement going forward. Some CVA programs have been assessed with findings disaggregated for adolescents and their wellbeing outcomes; some have been evaluated and have shared their findings and learning with the broader humanitarian community. However, critical gaps in evidence and practice remain and need to be tackled. In practice, adolescents' needs and capacities remain insufficiently integrated into humanitarian response as a whole, including within CVA, and adolescents are overlooked broadly, and with CVA in particular, despite awareness that adolescents take on increased responsibilities in crisis and for which CVA could be helpful.

Misconceptions remain about the riskiness of CVA overall, even though cash is not inherently risky. The desk review revealed fears – without evidence – that adolescents cannot manage CVA, assumed inherent risks of CVA, and inadequately mitigated associated risks. These have led to an avoidance of using CVA for adolescent outcomes in a systemic and scaled manner. The desk review suggested that humanitarian actors either avoid engaging adolescents in CVA, or resort to engagement of adolescents only when it is unavoidable, such as in the case of unaccompanied and separated youth without adult caregivers, child-headed households, adolescents formerly associated with armed groups, and adolescent-aged mothers. In terms of these groups of adolescents, the desk review suggested that

humanitarian actors may be directly transferring cash to these adolescents on a larger scale than is currently acknowledged or communicated in external programmatic documents. As a result, learning is not being shared widely to benefit the humanitarian community and move the field forward through greater evidence and evidence-based practice, and the potential of CVA to enhance the wellbeing of all adolescents is not being achieved.

In some examples of programming using CVA that were identified through the desk review, adolescents experienced age-specific associated risks that were not adequately mitigated during program design. Adolescent girls faced gender-specific risks in some of these programs. Even in programming using CVA that aimed to reach adolescents, adolescents with disabilities were broadly overlooked or their intersectional needs and capacities were ignored.

Nevertheless, there are positive trajectories toward increased engagement of adolescents in CVA. The literature that was reviewed, and key informants who were interviewed, recognised the non-homogeneity and diversity of adolescents' developmental needs, as well as their capacities to lead themselves and their communities. The desk review identified examples of programming using CVA that did successfully engage adolescent girls and boys.

Much of the literature and the key informant interviews acknowledged that CVA is a more dignified form of humanitarian assistance – compared with in-kind and some direct services – and that adolescents have a right to dignified humanitarian assistance. With adequate guidance and tools, humanitarian responders can more effectively and safely engage adolescents in CVA for adolescent wellbeing and as beneficiaries of, recipients of, and leaders in CVA programming. Existing sectoral guidance on education, sexual and reproductive health, and protection can be built upon to design CVA that supports the wellbeing of adolescent boys and girls affected by conflict and crisis.

The Use of cash and voucher assistance for the wellbeing of adolescent boys and girls in crisis desk review are available at:

www.plan-international.org/publications/cash-voucher-assistance-adolescents

<http://wrc.ms/cash-voucher-assistance-adolescents>

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