

# International organizations' and the global proliferation of conditional cash transfers

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Since the mid-1990s, roughly one third of the world's countries has implemented a social assistance program known as *conditional cash transfer (CCT)*. These programs aim to mitigate poverty through strictly targeted cash transfers and conditions designed to promote human capital accumulation among the poor. Conditional cash transfers, also known by the acronym CCT, began to gain recognition after the first evaluations of the Mexican program PROGRESA came out at the turn of the millennium. By now conditional cash transfers have been established as one of the most well-known and widespread policy models worldwide, with more than 60 countries<sup>1</sup> having implemented such a program (Honorati et al. 2015), majority of them as developmental social policy programs in the "global south"<sup>2</sup>. Notably, CCTs have been adopted by governments across the ideological spectrum in socio-economically diverse group of countries (Sugyama 2011; Osorio Gonnert 2014).

Initial impact evaluations and broad overviews by international financial institutions (IFI) maintained that Mexico – and, concurrently, Brazil – had created an exemplary evidence-based programme which reduced poverty and yielded positive results regarding school attendance, nutrition and other variables (e.g. IFPRI 2000; IFPRI 2003; Interamerican Development Bank 2003; World Bank 2004). However, CCTs were not universally embraced and were also met with a considerable amount of controversy and criticism (for an overview see: Landhani and Slater 2018).

Against this background, the extensive global proliferation of CCTs has been remarkable and begs the question: *How did conditional cash transfers catch on?*

For global social policy, this question is topical and significant. On a global scale, contemporary discussion about social policy principles and the course of welfare reform is increasingly informed by policy adoption in the Global South. Importantly, the decisions

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<sup>1</sup> CCTs have also been established in several cities and states, thus referring to a country having implemented such a program does not necessarily indicate that the national government would have been the implementing body.

<sup>2</sup> The term "global south" is disputed and not particularly descriptive, but it is used here as a shorthand to refer broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, *mostly* low-and middle-income countries outside Europe and North America (see for example: Dados and Connell 2012).

regarding the type of social policies adopted and implemented structure the direction of future reforms, as policy arrangements tend to get locked in and become fundamental institutional frameworks, creating constraints on and incentives for future political action (Myles and Pierson 2001, 312). This raises important questions of how global policy models emerge and which qualities these widespread policies have that enable them to travel and be adopted in different contexts.

There is now an extensive body of research that has explored conditional cash transfers and their global proliferation. The first wave of literature concerning CCTs was produced mainly by international financial institutions, program officials, and development organisations. It consists of evaluations and overviews that largely highlight the positive aspects of these programs (e.g., Morley and Coady 2003; Skoufias and McClafferty 2001) A second wave of research emerged around ten years after the first evaluations and sought answers to the rapid proliferation of CCT programs either through the lens of diffusion (Sugiyama 2011; Osorio Gannett 2014; Brooks 2015; Simpson 2018) or by policy transfer oriented studies analyzing local political processes as well as transnational policy chains (Morais de Sá e Silva, ; Franzoni and Voorend 2011; Fenwick 2013; Osorio Gonnet xx; Porto de Oliveira 2019; Milhorance 2020; Howlett, et al. 2018). In summary, this literature has provided insights on the proliferation of CCTs by examining the *qualities of the countries* that have adopted the policy (policy diffusion) and through the actions of individuals and collective actors involved in the local and transnational policy processes (policy transfer). This body of literature has commendably explored the domestic and international determinants that have led to and facilitated the adoption of CCTs in different countries and provided valuable insights on the phenomenon.

However, the significance and complexity of the studied phenomenon call for further inquiry into in the emergence and proliferation of CCTs. This paper makes a novel contribution to the body of literature examining the proliferation of CCTs by applying a constructionist theoretical framework. Scholars working from a constructionist perspective in international relations, sociology and political science have drawn attention to what I define here as *global governance through knowledge production, dissemination and usage* and paid increasing attention to the international organizations' (IOs) role in the production of internationally adhered norms and more specific scripts or models for national policymaking.

Drawing from this scholarship the aim of this paper is to explore international organizations' role in the proliferation of the conditional cash transfer policy model. The results presented and the arguments made are based on the central findings of my PhD dissertation titled *Discursive Construction of Conditional Cash Transfers: Analysis of a Global Policy Model*. I highlight the active role of the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank in the proliferation of conditional cash transfers by showing how these organisations constructed the CCT policy model and facilitated its global proliferation. The constructionist approach in itself serves as a particular lens, through which phenomena are interpreted. Essentially this comes down to how language is used and what is done with it. Starting from this perspective the central methodological tools used in the case studies that make up the dissertation all serve as different ways to qualitatively study language, and more particularly are grounded on qualitative analysis of textual data in the form of policy documents.