

Limits to Transformational Potential: Analysing Entitlement and Agency within a Conditional Cash Transfer Program in the Philippines

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Despite serving as the Philippines' main social protection strategy, debate continues surrounding the ability of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) to meet its long-term goal of breaking cycles of intergenerational poverty. To engage with this debate, this study brings together the constructs of entitlement and agency to analyse how different actors associated with 4Ps understand and experience the program. Drawing on forty-three semi-structured interviews with 4Ps beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries, and implementers, we provide a provisional explanation as to why a disconnect exists between the long-term goals of 4Ps and the experiences with the program among these different actors. In addition, this study highlights how challenges associated with the design and implementation of 4Ps, including limited transparency and communication of the program's eligibility requirements, rigid monitoring of beneficiary compliance, and delays in receiving cash transfers, may constrain the transformational potential of this social protection strategy.

Keywords: Conditional cash transfers, capability approach, poverty, human development, Philippines.

Introduction

In an effort to reduce poverty in both the short and long term, conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) provide cash entitlements to eligible beneficiaries who meet a set of predetermined conditionalities (Krishnan *et al.*, 2014; Millán *et al.*, 2019). Although smaller-scale CCTs exist, many programs operate at a national scale, such as Brazil's *Bolsa Familia* and Mexico's *Progresa-Oportunidades-Prospera* programs. Such CCTs have been lauded for their ability to reduce poverty and promote human development (Krishnan *et al.*, 2014; Bastagli *et al.*, 2019). Despite these potential benefits, CCTs have been criticised for the additional burdens that conditionalities impose on beneficiaries, the unequal distribution of entitlements, the relatively small size of cash grants,

challenges with service provision, disruptions to existing social relationships, and limitations to beneficiaries' sense of agency (Vadapalli, 2009; Benderly, 2011; Oduro, 2015; Fragoso, 2021).

In 2007, the Government of the Philippines piloted a CCT called the *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program* (4Ps) that has come to serve as the country's main social protection strategy (Orbeta et al., 2014; Acosta and Velarde, 2015). Modelled after other national-level CCTs, 4Ps was created with the dual objectives of alleviating poverty in the short-term through social assistance, while also interrupting the intergenerational cycle of poverty in the long-term through investment in the health and education of children (Agbon et al., 2013; Orbeta et al., 2014; Acosta and Velarde, 2015; Conchada and Tiongco, 2014; Mendoza, 2019). 4Ps emerged during a time when, despite a decade of sustained economic growth, the Philippines struggled to meet poverty reduction targets (Velarde and Fernandez, 2011; Acosta and Velarde, 2015; Saguin and Howlett, 2019). Led by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), 4Ps was launched with the financial, technical, and administrative support of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the Australian Agency for International Development. Within the Philippines, the DSWD partners with the Departments of Education, Health, and Interior and Local Government as well as the Land Bank of the Philippines to administer and monitor 4Ps (Fernandez and Olfindo, 2011; Frufonga, 2015; Mendoza, 2019).

The Government of the Philippines has framed 4Ps as a social protection program consisting of a set of entitlements for households that meet specific eligibility criteria and conditionalities related to child and maternal health, education, and family development (see Figure 1). The information management system used to determine whether a household is eligible to receive entitlements granted through 4Ps is known as *Listahanan*, or the National Household Targeting System for Poverty Reduction. The information entered into *Listahanan* is collected by government enumerators through a household assessment survey implemented once every four years (DSWD, 2019). A proxy means test¹ is then conducted to estimate the per capita income of a household and classify it as poor or non-poor based on provincial poverty thresholds (DSWD, 2019). Enrollment in 4Ps entitles low-income families to both cash and food grants; however, if beneficiaries do not comply with the established conditionalities, they may be subjected to deductions or suspensions of their cash grants. In some instances, non-compliance may result in removal from the program (Acosta and Velarde, 2015). Cash grants are disbursed either in person at designated distribution sites, or through a partner bank using an automated teller machine (ATM) card provided as a part of 4Ps.

In terms of effectiveness, a 2014 evaluation conducted by the DSWD found that 4Ps contributed to several beneficial outcomes for children including improved access to key healthcare services, greater utilisation of national healthcare benefits, and a higher rate of secondary school enrolment (Orbeta et al., 2014). In 2015, an evaluation led by the World Bank found that 4Ps had maintained good targeting accuracy, progressivity, and cost-efficiency in aiding the poor, and that it had helped to reduce short-term poverty by assisting beneficiary households in affording basic needs (Acosta and Velarde, 2015). Applauding the benefits of 4Ps, President Rodrigo Duterte signed a monumental piece of legislation to institutionalise the program in April 2019. The *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program Act* (No. 11310) outlined the government's commitment to making 4Ps a permanent and funded component of the DSWD and detailed the entitlements and conditionalities of the program. Initial narratives surrounding this legislation indicated that institutionalising the program

Eligibility Requirements		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living in a poor area based on objective measurements (the Family Income and Expenditure Survey, the poverty incidence of Small Area Estimates) • Classified as poor based on a proxy-means test • Household has at least one child aged 0-18 years or a woman who is pregnant 		
Health-Related Conditionalities	Education-Related Conditionalities	Additional Conditionalities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectant mothers must receive monthly antenatal care and give birth in a health facility • New mothers must receive monthly postnatal care • Children aged 0-5 years must receive monthly health services at a health clinic • Children aged 6-14 years must receive deworming pills twice per year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents must ensure that children aged 3-18 have at least an 85 per cent attendance rate at daycare, primary, or secondary school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least one parent must attend a monthly family development session (FDS), led by DSWD staff or partnering civil society organizations. These sessions are designed to provide education on various aspects of family life (e.g., child development, family dynamics, etc.)
Cash transfer amount for 4Ps		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligible households can receive up to 21,000 Philippine Pesos (PHP; \$413.70 USD)¹ per year. This is comprised of: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A monthly health cash grant of PHP500 (\$9.85 USD) 2. An education cash grant of PHP300-PHP500 (\$5.91-9.85 USD) per child for up to three children for each month of the school year 		

Figure 1. Characteristics and conditionalities of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps)
 Notes. Conversions between Philippine Pesos (PHP) and US Dollars (USD) are based on the exchange rate on January 1, 2020
 References: Fernandez and Olfindo, 2011; Orbeta *et al.*, 2014; Acosta and Velarde, 2015; Conchada and Tiongco, 2014; Peñalba, 2019; Saguin and Howlett, 2019.

would enable continuous and sustainable support for income poor households and human development objectives within the country (Ranada, 2019).

Despite the institutionalisation of 4Ps and its positive evaluations, the program has also faced criticism for design and implementation challenges (Tabuga and Reyes, 2012; Peñalba, 2019). For example, the periodic targeting strategy of 4Ps may exclude newly eligible households from the program (Albert and Dacuycuy, 2017; Economic Policy Research Institute, 2019; Dadap-Cantal *et al.*, 2021). Others have noted the small size of the cash grant relative to the income of poor households is not enough to result in meaningful impacts (Tabuga and Reyes, 2012; Economic Policy Research Institute, 2019). Concern has also been raised over the capacity of partner institutions to implement the program; for example, some health facilities serving 4Ps beneficiaries have limited capacity, making it challenging to monitor compliance with health-related conditionalities (Fernandez and Olfindo, 2011; Peñalba, 2019). Additionally, an evaluation of the outcomes of 4Ps by the Institute of Family Life and Children’s Studies (2016) found that 4Ps may contribute to community division in settings where there is confusion or mistrust in the identification and inclusion of 4Ps beneficiaries (Institute of Family Life and Children’s Studies, 2016).² More broadly, there are concerns that recent social policy reforms under the Duterte administration promote and entrench a residualist approach to social policy

that favours poverty targeting over universal or more inclusive policies and programs (Ramos, 2020).

We suggest that the disconnect between the proposed goals of 4Ps and local experiences of the program points to the contested nature of human development in the context of this social policy. Although existing evaluations of 4Ps emphasise the material benefits of the program, less attention has been paid to the process of achieving these benefits or the broader capabilities that shape experiences of human development. While evaluations focused on the material benefits of the 4Ps are important, we suggest that the recent institutionalisation of the program provides further impetus to interrogate how the design (such as, conditionalities, amount of transfer, size of program) and implementation (such as targeting beneficiaries, and monitoring compliance) of 4Ps contributes to diverse understandings and experiences of the program among different actors.

Examining entitlement and agency to explain the disconnect between goals and experiences surrounding 4Ps

This study was guided by two interrelated research questions. First, how do different actors associated with 4Ps (beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries, implementers) understand and experience the program? Second, how do the diverse, and at times contradictory, understandings and experiences of 4Ps expressed by these different actors help explain the contested nature of human development in relation to the program? Through addressing these questions, we aim to provide a provisional explanation as to why a disconnect exists between the proposed goals of 4Ps and experiences with the program among different actors. In this way, this study contributes to debates surrounding why 4Ps struggles to achieve its long-term goal of breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. In addition, this study sheds light on how design and implementation issues associated with 4Ps may constrain the transformational potential of this social policy.

To address these research questions, we engage with and bring together two distinct literatures to help explain why there is a disconnect between the proposed goals of 4Ps and local experiences of the program. First, we consider how the social construction of policy design influences how different actors understand and experience the same social program. Previous work by Scott (1998) and Schneider and Ingram (1993; 1997) demonstrates how policy making often requires simplifying the complex social identities and relationships among intended beneficiaries of social programs. In this way, social constructions of target populations can shape policy design (Schneider and Ingram, 1993), which can influence ideas surrounding who deserves to benefit from a social program and how a 'good beneficiary' should conduct themselves. Additionally, the various tools used to create and implement policies, such as targeting mechanisms and criteria, limit the ability of policies to account for local values, goals, and lived experiences.

These discussions demonstrate the tension between policy making processes and the construct of entitlement. We define entitlements as formal rights possessed by citizens through a social contract (e.g. Sen, 2008; Akerkar et al., 2016), which in the context of social protection programs such as 4Ps includes rights associated with freedom from poverty (Barrientos and Hulme, 2009; Akerkar et al., 2016). Although entitlements may be acknowledged by governments and public officials, meaningful realisation of these entitlements may be obstructed by oversimplified policy formulation, design, and implementation.

Second, and guided by Sen's capability approach, we examine how the concept of agency maps onto understandings and experiences of 4Ps among different actors connected to the program. Core tenets of the capability approach include functionings (well-being achievement) and capabilities (well-being freedoms). Functionings consist of an individual's current state or activities whereas capabilities include the real opportunities and freedoms available to an individual (Sen, 1992a). Within this framework, agency can be conceptualised as the realisation of values and goals (agency achievement) and the freedom to achieve these values and goals (agency freedom) (Sen, 1985; 1992a). Thus, while functionings and capabilities are important, it is equally important to consider who defines and decides which functionings and capabilities are significant for individuals and groups. Thus, and as described through Crocker and Robeyns' (2009) interpretation, Sen advocates for an agent-oriented capability approach. Specifically, Sen argues that individuals and groups should be 'active participant[s] in change, rather than . . . passive and docile recipient[s] of instructions or of dispensed assistance' (Sen, 1999: 281; cf: Crocker and Robeyns, 2009: 75). In this study, we define agency in terms of achievement and freedom, and consider the ability of different actors connected to 4Ps to self-determine and achieve functionings and capabilities.³

Overall, the constructs of entitlement and agency provide a useful lens to critically examine the extent to which 4Ps can contribute to transformational changes and disrupt intergenerational poverty in the Philippines, while also helping to explain why a disconnect may exist between the proposed goals of 4Ps and local experiences of the program. Overall, we argue that considerations of entitlement and agency should be central to the design and implementation of 4Ps in order to move beyond an exclusive focus on the material benefits of the program, and to embrace a broader and more holistic view of human development that is concerned with the expansion of freedoms to live a meaningful life.

Methods

Study context

This study was conducted in the cities of Bacolod, Bago, and Victorias in Negros Occidental, Philippines. Of note, most of the data collection was completed in and around Bacolod City, which is the capital city of the province of Negros Occidental. Despite its classification as a 'Highly Urbanized City', Bacolod City has a high prevalence of poverty, with 22.6 per cent of households with an income below the national poverty threshold (Bacolod City Government, 2018). According to data from the DSWD, 10,847 households were beneficiaries of 4Ps in Bacolod City as of August 2019 (Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program, 2019).

Partnership and participant recruitment

This study was conducted in collaboration with International Care Ministries (ICM), which is a Philippines-based non-governmental organisation (NGO). ICM works exclusively with ultra-poor families (defined by ICM as households that earn less than \$0.50USD or 22PHP per person per day) (Luu *et al.*, 2022). At the time of data collection, ICM operated across twenty-nine branch offices in the Visayas and Mindanao including in Bacolod City,

Negros Occidental (study site). ICM's core program is called Transform, which is a fifteen-week community-based education program that provides weekly health and livelihoods curriculum along with experiential learning opportunities for approximately thirty individuals per community. On average, fifteen distinct Transform programs operate from each branch office at any given time.

To enrol participants in Transform, ICM uses an asset-based poverty score card approach to measure poverty. Based on this targeting approach, only members of ultra-poor households are invited to participate in Transform. ICM's poverty score card approach is similar to the proxy-means test used in *Listahanan*. As a result, participants enrolled in ICM's Transform program often match the targeting profile of 4Ps (i.e. living in a poor area; classified as poor based on a proxy-means test; household has at least one child aged zero to eighteen or a woman who is pregnant). However, as participation in Transform is not related to enrollment in 4Ps, ICM's Transform program includes both 4Ps beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries.

For this study, we recruited thirty-four female Transform participants from seven communities, which included a combination of urban, peri-urban, and rural settings. Recruitment and data collection took place over several weeks in the middle of active Transform programs.⁴ Recruitment from the Transform program offered the opportunity to recruit 4Ps beneficiaries, in addition to individuals who were presumably eligible for 4Ps (based on the eligibility criteria described in Figure 1) but were not current beneficiaries. The inclusion of non-beneficiaries was decided to more fully examine understandings and experiences surrounding entitlement and 4Ps among these individuals. Previous research has demonstrated that eligible households are routinely excluded from 4Ps, as the household targeting system (*Listahanan*) fails to capture the dynamic nature of poverty (Dadap-Cantal et al., 2021). Thus, we wanted to understand the impact of a potentially ineffective targeting system on presumably eligible households, and how this reality helped explain the broader disconnect between the proposed goals of 4Ps and the experiences of different actors connected to the program. In total, fourteen beneficiary and twenty non-beneficiary participants were recruited (see Table 1).

Additionally, we recruited nine participants who were implementers of 4Ps, with the aim of including individuals from various positions and responsibilities with respect to program implementation. 4Ps implementers were recruited from two offices of the DSWD in Bacolod City and Bago City. Specific roles of these participants included social workers (n=5), local government unit links (n=2), and social welfare officers (n=2).⁵ On average, these individuals had been employed by the DSWD for 12.4 years (range: 0.5-30 years).

Data collection

Qualitative research methods have been used in existing research to better understand the processes involved in the implementation of CCTs, as well as the overall impact of CCT interventions (e.g. Adato, 2007; Krishnan et al., 2014; Yildirim et al., 2014; Oduro, 2015). Qualitative methods can simultaneously provide insight into the significance of the sociocultural, political, economic, and historical contexts of CCTs, as well as the lived experiences of program beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries, and implementers (Adato, 2007).

Taking a qualitative approach, we developed two separate semi-structured interview guides for data collection: one guide to explore the experiences of 4Ps beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries; and a second guide to explore the experiences of 4Ps implementers.

Table 1 Demographic information for 4Ps beneficiary and non-beneficiary participants from Negros Occidental, Philippines (n=34)

	Beneficiary (n=14)	Non-beneficiary (n=20)
Demographics		
Mean age (range)	46.2 years (19 years-61 years) ^a	38.4 years (23 years-67 years)
Mean number of household members (range)	7.8 members (5 members-11 members) ^b	5.5 members (3 members-15 members)
Primary Occupation		
No employment outside of the household (%)	9 (64.3%)	11 (55.0%)
External farm labour (%)	1 (7.1%)	5 (25.0%)
Other (%)	4 (28.6%)	4 (20.0%)
Level of Education Completed		
No school (%)	0	1 (5.0%)
Some elementary school (%)	7 (50.0%)	4 (20.0%)
Some secondary school (%)	6 (42.9%)	13 (65.0%)
Some college or vocational school (%)	1 (7.1%)	2 (10.0%)

^a One nineteen-year-old respondent was not a direct beneficiary of 4Ps; however, she was a member of a family that received 4Ps. Thus, she was able to provide insights on her experiences of being a member of a 4Ps beneficiary household.

^b Includes two single-parent households where the respondent was a widow.

Both interview guides were refined following input from staff members of the ICM Bacolod City branch office. In addition, the first interview guide was piloted with two 4Ps beneficiaries and two non-beneficiaries and the second interview guide was piloted with two 4Ps implementers.

For all interviews, a full oral explanation of the study was provided prior to beginning the interview (in English or Hiligaynon based on the preference of the interviewee) using a recruitment script. In addition, informed written or oral consent was obtained. Interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the interviewee (English or Hiligaynon) and were audio recorded. For interviews not conducted in English, a trained translator was present to provide real time translation.

Data analysis

Interviews were translated, transcribed, and thematically analysed using a hybrid inductive-deductive approach (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). First, open coding was used to inductively identify emergent themes within the data to uncover meaningful patterns in the narratives of participants. Second, and guided by the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011), we examined how different actors (i.e. beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries, and implementers) articulated and experienced functionings and capabilities, in addition to the constructs of entitlement and agency.

Results

Determining who can receive 4Ps: 'why haven't I been chosen?'

When asked about the process used to determine eligibility for 4Ps, implementers of the program frequently described 4Ps as having been created for the 'poorest of the poor.' Implementers also discussed using the national targeting program, *Listahanan*, with one implementer describing it as a system that 'automatically identifies if you are poor or non-poor.' She further explained, 'if non-poor, you will be excluded. If poor, you will be included.' Another implementer stated that when asked by individuals 'how they can avail or join the program' she answered, 'you can be a grantee if you [...] are in the *Listahanan*.' Although *Listahanan* is an integral part of the enrollment process, none of the 4Ps beneficiaries mentioned this system when asked about eligibility requirements for the program.

In our conversations with 4Ps beneficiaries, we found that they had limited knowledge about how they were enrolled in the program. Many beneficiaries remembered participating in a survey or census in the past, but explained that at the time of the survey, they were not aware it was related to 4Ps. Only subsequently did they learn that the survey was used to assess their eligibility for the program. For example, when asked how she accessed 4Ps, a sixty-one-year-old beneficiary stated:

I was interviewed, and [...] the interviewer said it was more like a census [of] the whole household [...] I was shocked when I knew that I got into 4Ps. [...] because I felt that it was like an ordinary survey for census.

Similarly, non-beneficiary participants were asked if they knew why they were *not* chosen to receive 4Ps. All non-beneficiaries explained that they were unaware as to why they were not selected, and a few of these participants speculated that local politics were involved in the selection process. For example, a sixty-three-year-old woman expressed her confusion as to why she was not chosen to receive 4Ps:

I don't know [why I was not chosen]. A lot [of] people were wondering why I haven't been chosen as a part of 4Ps. I am also a person with a disability and I have been through a lot of surveys and I think it's because it's political. Whoever is near to the barangay [office], that is who can get 4Ps.

We found that households we identified as presumably eligible for 4Ps (based on the criteria described in Figure 1) were not always enrolled in the program. Indeed, there were distinct demographic trends associated with 4P beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. For example, in our sample, 4Ps beneficiaries were generally middle-aged adults (69.3 per cent between forty to fifty-nine years old) and had children attending or recently graduated from secondary school. In contrast, non-beneficiaries in our sample were generally younger adults (57.9 per cent between twenty-three to thirty-nine years old) with infants and young children who were attending elementary school. This finding suggests that young families who were newly eligible for 4Ps (e.g. based on the recent birth of one or more children, the entry of one or more children into elementary school) were less likely

to be enrolled in the program. This could be explained by the program's periodic approach to determining eligibility using *Listahanan*.

Conditionality compliance and monitoring: 'everything should have receipts'

When speaking about their experiences of meeting program conditionalities, beneficiaries explained that they had limited ability to determine *how* they met these conditionalities. For example, when asked if she enjoyed attending monthly family development session (FDS) meetings, a required conditionality of 4Ps, one forty-one-year-old woman stated she had 'no choice' but to attend. Others discussed their willingness to meet program conditionalities, with one fifty-five-year-old woman explaining, 'I am not worried [about meeting the conditionalities] because whatever the requirements they give [...] I am willing to do it.' Another beneficiary, a forty-five-year-old woman, stated, 'you just need to follow the roles given to you.'

Additionally, our findings suggest that the majority of beneficiaries used the entire cash grant provided for expenses associated with fulfilling the conditionalities of 4Ps. For example, beneficiaries described using 4Ps money to pay for expenses such as school fees and materials, as well as transportation costs to FDS meetings, health centres, and for their children to attend school. Beneficiaries frequently spoke about how 4Ps implementers closely monitored the use of the cash grants, describing how they were required to bring receipts of their expenses to FDS meetings. For example, a sixty-year-old woman receiving 4Ps explained that 'everything should have receipts' and highlighted the potential consequences of using the cash grant incorrectly, saying, 'there are so many people that [don't] have 4Ps yet, and if you're abusing your own 4Ps maybe [it will be] given to them.' In this way, beneficiaries' experiences of complying with program conditionalities was marked by limited agency within the process.

Although most of the beneficiaries we interviewed described closely adhering to program conditionalities, 4Ps implementers spoke at length about monitoring the non-compliance of beneficiaries. Their monitoring included home visits, in addition to recording attendance and checking receipts at FDS meetings. Implementers also spoke about the key role teachers played in monitoring the school attendance of the children of beneficiaries, with one implementer stating, 'our monitoring on education is very closely coordinated with the teachers in the school [...] they are the ones marking compliance of the children.'

Several implementers explained that when they found beneficiaries not complying with conditionalities, they would give them a formal warning, followed by a deduction to their cash grant. If they still did not comply, implementers would suspend beneficiaries from the program. One implementer described the support they provided to non-compliant beneficiaries, stating, 'if they miss the [FDS] meeting, we have remedial [sessions] to give them [a] chance.... Another implementer explained that when beneficiaries did not have their ATM cards during FDS meetings they would be given warnings by program facilitators, followed by a 'series of counselling.' This implementer explained that 'with all the effort, if they will not cooperate, eventually we will recommend them to be delisted from the program.' Despite these actions to support beneficiary compliance, one implementer explained how recent changes to the monitoring process made it easier to suspend beneficiaries:

[If] they have already three consecutive non-compliance [warnings] [...] from already six months straight [...] they will be suspended. [...]. So, now they are already alert [...] to meet the requirements because they are afraid also, because before [...] they [would only be] deducted five hundred [Philippine Pesos] – and it's okay for them [...] but now if they are consecutively absent or non-compliant within six months they will be suspended already.

Thus, beneficiaries faced limited capacity to determine their level of compliance for fear of expulsion from the program.

Despite restricted options, the non-compliance of some beneficiaries was framed by implementers as both a necessity and a strategic choice. For example, several implementers mentioned the seasonality of compliance, explaining that beneficiaries would often choose not to attend FDS meetings or to withdraw their children from school during harvest seasons when extra income could be made through daily labour in agriculture. Describing this, one implementer stated:

We encounter a lot [of] the children stop schooling even though they have 4Ps – they have [an] allotted amount [of] cash for their study but still they choose to work in sugarcane fields [and] rice fields so that they will have income.

Similarly, when asked about attendance at FDS meetings, one implementer explained that 'the attendances change [...] sometimes [...] they still have to [be] absent [be]cause [...] they don't want to miss [...] work in the field [...].' These examples may indicate a form of strategic non-compliance in which beneficiaries chose to accept the risk of penalty or expulsion from 4Ps to maintain other livelihood strategies.

Disbursing cash transfers: 'don't complain, just wait'

When asked about their experiences with the delivery of cash grants, 4Ps beneficiaries frequently spoke about delays in receiving the bi-monthly grants. Although some beneficiaries did not know why their payments were delayed, other beneficiaries provided different explanations. These explanations focused on challenges with program administration, such as money being reallocated to typhoon victims, 4Ps administrators losing ATM cards prior to distributing them to beneficiaries, beneficiaries moving from one region to another, and disruptions due to the national election.

Delayed payments impacted the lives of beneficiaries in several ways. For example, to access funds, one participant had to travel to the city centre where ATMs associated with the program were located. Only after she paid for transportation to the city and checked her account did she find out that the funds had not yet been deposited. As a result, the beneficiary lost a day of income from local labour opportunities and paid transportation costs without the benefit of the 4Ps cash grant. Such delays also resulted in budgeting challenges for beneficiaries, with one fifty-five-year-old woman explaining that delays meant, 'they don't have any idea for [their] budget.' However, the nineteen-year-old daughter of one 4Ps beneficiary explained that, 'it's not really a big deal for [her family] if there's a delay [...] since her brothers [are] already working they give allowance to their mother every week.' The sentiment expressed by this participant perhaps indicated that the cash grant from 4Ps was viewed as an unreliable part of the overall livelihood strategy of this household.

When asked how they found out that payments were delayed, a few beneficiaries explained that representatives from 4Ps communicated this information at FDS meetings, while others said there was no information about delays. Similarly, participants often described their experiences receiving 4Ps as being marked by uncertainty and waiting. For example, one fifty-four-year-old woman explained that ‘they don’t know the reason [for delays in payment] they just wait for the money to arrive.’ When asked what it was like to experience a delay in payments, another fifty-four-year-old woman stated, ‘it’s very hard for me because there’s no help from the DSWD money, so when we ask, the 4Ps said [. . .] ‘don’t complain just wait.’ Thus, it is not surprising that several beneficiaries identified the on-time disbursement of 4Ps funds as the main area for improvement with the program.

Although some 4Ps implementers were also uncertain about the factors that contributed to delays in fund distribution, others had various explanations. These explanations were largely focused on structural issues and included funds running out due to unexpectedly high compliance rates, challenges with partner institutions (e.g. local banks) distributing the grants, and intentionally delaying payments at the regional and central office during the national election. In this way, the experiences of both beneficiaries and implementers illustrate how disruptions with the disbursement of 4Ps led to uncertainty among beneficiaries.

Experiences of program outcomes: ‘not enough’

Some 4Ps beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries described the program as a ‘big help,’ specifically related to affording education and food. For example, a sixty-year-old woman explained this sentiment, stating ‘it really is a big help for the poor [. . .] it helps [. . .] my son to be in school. I’m really obliged.’ Another participant, who was the nineteen-year-old daughter of a 4Ps beneficiary, explained that her household ‘can eat well because of the 4Ps.’ Similarly, several non-beneficiaries articulated that the program appeared to have a positive impact among beneficiaries, with a twenty-six-year-old woman explaining ‘the 4Ps has helped [beneficiaries] a lot, every time they get their [payment], they can buy rice for the whole house.’

Most participants receiving 4Ps found that the cash grant only covered costs associated with meeting the conditionalities of the program and was ‘not enough’ to spend on other necessities, loan repayments, or to save for the future. For example, the sixty-year-old woman who previously described 4Ps as a ‘big help,’ stated that she had to prioritise paying her grandchildren’s school fees over her own health needs (specifically for a diagnostic test needed for a toothache):

So, the money is really intended for the kids [. . .] school is coming soon, so we will be buying uniforms, food, materials [. . .] I think that my tooth can wait [. . .] There are more important things than my tooth.

When asked whether or not she was able to save any part of the 4Ps cash grant, a forty-one-year-old woman expressed, ‘I have no savings because it’s [. . .] very tight budgeting, so I have to dispense everything [received by 4Ps] because of the needs of the family.’

Similarly, one implementer also acknowledged that the cash grant was not sufficient for meeting all the needs of beneficiaries, stating ‘the little amount the government is giving them is not, of course it’s not substantial [in comparison] to their need [. . .].’ However, most

implementers believed the program provided multiple material and immaterial benefits to beneficiaries. For example, the same implementer who acknowledged that the cash grant was insufficient, highlighted the immaterial benefits of the program:

[...] with the invocation of values for them, [...] they will realize that they should not stop doing things, striving hard, to augment on the things that the government is giving them so that their children will be educated. And these children will be later on the agent of change.

Other immaterial outcomes of the program for 4Ps beneficiaries, as described by implementers, included 'being given responsibility,' 'gaining knowledge,' 'changing attitudes and values,' and 'empowerment.'

Implementers also spoke about the material outcomes of the program, including poverty alleviation, enhanced livelihood strategies, secure housing, health benefits, and success in education and employment. For example, one implementer described the changes in the lives of 4Ps families living in mountain areas as 'very appreciable.' She explained that 4Ps helped families in this region complete their houses, raise livestock, and grow vegetables to provide extra sources of income, and send their children to school. In this way, implementers viewed 4Ps as helping beneficiaries 'get out from impoverished situations.' Overall, 4Ps implementers extolled the positive material and immaterial outcomes of the program as illustrative of the dual ways the intervention impacts the lives of 4Ps beneficiaries. However, as highlighted, 4Ps beneficiaries only cited the material benefits of the intervention, or lack thereof. The differing experiences of program outcomes may reflect the lived realities of 4Ps beneficiaries and their focus on meeting the basic material needs of their households.

Discussion

The recent institutionalisation of 4Ps aligns with broader efforts by the Duterte administration to entrench poverty-targeted approaches through social policy (Ramos, 2020). This policy decision explains, in part, the reason why a disconnect exists between the proposed goals of 4Ps and the experiences of the program among different actors. To further this analysis, we examine how the constructs of entitlement and agency help to explain why this disconnect exists and what this disconnect means for intended recipients of 4Ps (inclusive of eligible non-beneficiaries and beneficiaries).

Entitlement and 4Ps

Social protection programs have been defined as an 'entitlement to benefits that society provides to individuals and households – through public and collective measures – to protect against low or declining living standards arising out of a number of basic risks and needs' (van Ginneken, 2003: 11, as cited in Barrientos and Hulme, 2009). Notably, Akerkar et al. (2016) highlight how existing social protection programs can distribute entitlements unequally or ineffectively through the exclusion of the most vulnerable, targeting inefficiency, and a lack of information and transparency. Despite the acknowledgement of entitlements by governments and policymakers, findings from this study demonstrate how the meaningful realisation of these entitlements may be obstructed by oversimplified social constructions of policy making and of 'target' populations (Schneider

and Ingram, 1993; 1997). The targeting strategies of 4Ps (i.e. use of *Listahanan*), were not well understood by – or perhaps communicated to – beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. Specifically, non-beneficiaries often believed that program implementers influenced who received the cash grant based on existing social and political relationships rather than the entitlement of low-income households to government benefits. The experiences shared by non-beneficiaries, who matched the eligibility profile for 4Ps but were not enrolled in the program, highlight how simplifying complex social identities and relationships among intended beneficiaries of a social program can contribute to incongruent and artificial distinctions between beneficiaries (i.e. the ‘deserving poor’) and non-beneficiaries (i.e. the ‘undeserving non-poor’). In turn, these incongruent and artificial distinctions can guide the unequal distribution of entitlements, which exacerbates the disconnect between the stated goals of 4Ps and the experiences of actors connected to the program. Additionally, due to the periodic targeting strategy employed through *Listahanan*, there are limited opportunities for eligible non-beneficiaries to access 4Ps, and this fact further limits the transformational potential of the program.

Implementation factors also have the potential to impact whether beneficiaries understood and experienced 4Ps as an entitlement. The heavy emphasis 4Ps implementers placed on monitoring the compliance of beneficiaries has the potential to undermine understandings of 4Ps as a program designed to support the basic needs of beneficiaries. Delayed payments experienced by beneficiaries can further perpetuate this understanding. This finding supports Oduro’s (2015: 34) argument that undue delays of payments ‘undermine the accountability of the state and suggest that the contractual relationship between the state and its citizens is weak.’ We build on this argument suggesting that – as seen in the case of 4Ps – when the state does not meet its responsibilities to beneficiaries (i.e. the on-time delivery of the 4Ps cash grant), beneficiaries are more likely to consider and experience the program as a ‘handout’ rather than an ‘entitlement.’

Agency and 4Ps

In further examining and explaining why there is a disconnect between the proposed goals of 4Ps and experiences of the program among different actors, it is important to consider how 4Ps may constrain the agency of beneficiaries. This examination draws on the work of Sen (1992b), who argues that targeted approaches to poverty alleviation promote the view that beneficiaries are passive recipients rather than agents who can actively contribute to poverty alleviation processes. With this background, it is important to consider how the design and structure of a targeted social protection program like 4Ps may constrain the agency of intended beneficiaries.

In this study, we found that stringent monitoring of compliance by 4Ps implementers resulted in beneficiaries having little ability to determine how they navigated the program (i.e. limited agency achievement). The possibility of beneficiaries receiving a cash deduction or suspension from the program if conditionalities were not met further constrained beneficiary agency. As many beneficiaries were among the ‘poorest of the poor,’ they relied on the 4Ps grants as one part of their overall livelihood strategies and thus, for some, not meeting conditionalities was not a viable option. This finding is similar to a study of a CCT program in Ghana where beneficiaries perceived conditionalities as the program officials telling them ‘what to do,’ which in turn led them to feel like ‘less of a person’ (Oduro, 2015: 33).

Implementers highlighted that beneficiaries were not always compliant with conditionalities (e.g. missing FDS meetings or removing their children from school to engage in agricultural day labour during harvest seasons). Existing literature has discussed 'compliance costs' (Rinehart and McGuire, 2017: 165), in addition to the structural and contextual barriers influencing the ability of beneficiaries to meet program conditionalities (Álvarez et al., 2008; González-Flores et al., 2012; Barrientos and Villa, 2017; Reiningger et al., 2019). In our study, seasonality was an important factor influencing compliance costs, with beneficiaries seemingly less inclined to comply with program conditionalities when there were other viable livelihood options available. Implementers viewed non-compliance during 'cropping season' as strategic, which may provide an example of some beneficiaries navigating the program in a way that worked for them; however, no beneficiaries described non-compliance in this way.

Another structural challenge limiting the agency freedom of beneficiaries was delayed payments. Similar to Cookson's (2016) finding in her study on the reproduction of inequality through a CCT in Peru, we suggest that the act of indeterminately waiting for cash grants to arrive can exacerbate unequal power dynamics between 4Ps implementers and beneficiaries. Further, inconsistent payments negatively influenced the ability of beneficiaries to reliably budget their money. This finding is in line with Sholkamy's (2014) study of a small-scale pilot CCT in Cairo, Egypt that found that the reliability of a cash transfer enabled beneficiaries to plan for their futures, provided beneficiaries with a sense of enhanced security, and supported individual agency.

The amount of the cash transfer provided also has the potential to further constrain the agency freedom of beneficiaries. As illustrated in our findings, 4Ps beneficiaries generally perceived the quantity of money provided by the program as 'not enough' to spend on anything other than meeting program conditionalities. In this way, the minimal decision-making power regarding how cash transfers were spent may have contributed to beneficiaries emphasising the material (e.g. meeting basic needs) rather than immaterial (e.g. empowerment) objectives of the program. Although previous evaluations have identified that 4Ps is meeting its objectives in terms of positive health and educational outcomes (Orbeta et al., 2014), we suggest that the low amount of the cash transfer may constrain immaterial, and potentially more transformational program outcomes. As Fragoso (2021) asserts, even if cash transfers are empirically sufficient in meeting beneficiaries' basic needs, targeting the 'poor' as passive beneficiaries has the potential to further perpetuate a sense of powerlessness among beneficiaries.

These findings demonstrate how the design and structure of 4Ps may constrain the agency achievement and freedom of beneficiaries and helps explain why there is a disconnect between the proposed goals of 4Ps and the experiences of intended beneficiaries. Through constraining agency achievement and freedom, the design and structure of 4Ps limits the ability of intended beneficiaries to decide how to achieve certain functionings and capabilities that are important to them. Further, the emphasis on targeted and rigidly controlled approaches to poverty alleviation may help explain why 4Ps has been limited in its transformational potential and its ability to break cycles of intergenerational poverty.

Conclusion

In this study, we have highlighted challenges in the design and implementation of 4Ps, which contributed to a disconnect between the proposed goals of 4Ps and local

experiences of the program among various actors. These challenges included: limited transparency and communication of the program's eligibility requirements; rigid monitoring of beneficiary compliance; delays in receiving cash transfers; and an insufficient amount of money provided. These challenges may contribute to non-beneficiaries and beneficiaries experiencing limited entitlement and agency in relation to 4Ps. Additionally, these challenges may help explain why the 4Ps has been limited to date in its ability to break cycles of intergenerational poverty. Overall, we see an opportunity for both entitlement and agency to be more prominently considered when designing and implementing CCTs in order to realise poverty reduction goals in the short-term and enhanced human development in the long-term.

This study has several limitations. First, recruitment through the Transform program may have influenced how study participants viewed themselves relative to other community members and may have shaped their perspectives on 4Ps. Future research could conduct similar qualitative work with individuals who are not connected to an NGO-based poverty alleviation program. Second, due to the highly decentralised nature of health and social service provision across the Philippines, this study is limited in its ability to comment on the nature of 4Ps implementation across the country. In addition, this decentralisation may mean that the experiences of different actors with 4Ps in this study may not reflect experiences with program implementation in other settings. With that said, the recent institutionalisation of 4Ps offers an opportunity to continue to critically appraise the program's achievements to date and consider opportunities for further technical and program improvements. In particular, the periodic targeting strategy used through *Listahanan* represents a technical obstacle to the functioning of 4Ps, and effort should be made to update or replace this system to better account for the dynamic nature of poverty. Innovation within this system represents an important area for future program improvement and research.

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Notes

1 According to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD, 2019) the variables used for the proxy-means test and their weights are confidential. These variables are observable and cannot be manipulated, and could include: housing materials, access to basic services and facilities, and ownership of certain assets (DSWD, 2019).

2 In particular, non-beneficiaries experiencing similar levels of poverty as 4Ps beneficiaries discussed how there was confusion as to why they had not been selected for the program (Institute of Family Life and Children's Studies, 2016).

3 This conceptualisation of agency differs from other ‘thinner’ definitions of agency such as the definition used by the World Bank (see World Bank, 2005) that focuses on ‘the socioeconomically, culturally, and politically determined ability to shape the world around oneself’ (2005: 5, as cited in Crocker and Robeyns, 2009: 82). As Crocker and Robeyns (2009: 82) argue, and in contrast to Sen’s conceptualisation of agency, the World Bank’s definition of agency is limited in its recognition of ‘self-determination’ as an important component of agency.

4 Transform is a fifteen-week community-based education program with instruction on three areas: values, health, and livelihoods. Transform participants meet on a weekly basis for approximately ninety minutes. Previous evaluations of Transform have indicated that the program contributes to an increase in income combined with a decrease in perceived relative economic status after six months following the program (Bryan et al., 2021). As data collection for this study took place in the middle of active Transform programs (i.e. in the middle of the fifteen-week period), it is possible that some of the content taught through the Transform program would influence participant attitudes toward the constructs of entitlement and agency.

5 Social workers are involved in monitoring day-to-day needs of families experiencing poverty and other intersecting forms of marginalisation in the catchment area where they work. Social workers can be involved in determining eligibility for different social welfare programs including 4Ps. Local government unit links are responsible for monitoring adherence with conditionalities associated with 4Ps in a specific region. Social welfare officers coordinate and supervise activities of social workers and local government unit links in a specific region in relation to 4Ps and other programs offered through the Department of Social Welfare and Development. Due to the decentralisation of health and social services in the Philippines (Dodd et al., 2021), there may be some variation in the roles and responsibilities of service providers across settings.

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