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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PERCEPTIONS, MANAGEMENT METHODS AND CONFLICTS ASSOCIATED WITH SOCIAL CASH TRANSFERS IN RURAL NIGER

Abdou Bagna Amadou

Département de Géographie, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Université Abdou Moumouni, BP 10963, Niamey, Niger.

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Abstract

Following the example of other African countries, Niger has also set up a social safety net system based on two major programmes: the cash transfer programme and the cash-for-work programme implemented by a project which now constitutes a permanent institutional mechanism of the State. The aim of this system is to strengthen the resilience of poor people suffering from food and nutritional insecurity by regularly transferring them a minimum amount of financial resources. This study focuses on the first programme, cash transfers. It examines the strategies used by beneficiaries to control and manage cash by analysing the perceptions of key players regarding the principles of the intervention. The results show a diversity of ways in which cash is managed and used, which largely reflects the socio-demographic characteristics of the beneficiaries. In addition, the study reveals a number of problems surrounding this cash intervention, which has now become a real dilemma for certain players in the face of the population's lack of understanding.

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Introduction:-

Social cash transfers (SCTs)¹ are an innovative approach to public intervention initially implemented in developing countries, particularly in Asia and Latin America, in the 1990s (Damon et al, 2010). They were gradually developed in sub-Saharan Africa from the 2000s onwards in response to the ineffectiveness of traditional responses to the many challenges faced by populations, particularly rural populations, mainly in terms of food (Moore et al., 2012). In fact, in this part of Africa, vulnerability is becoming increasingly acute, particularly in rural areas, as a result of recent climate upheavals and the scale of their impact on household livelihoods (IPCC, 2019). This situation calls for new intervention strategies that prioritise actions in favour of poor and vulnerable people in order to protect them from multiple shocks and thus promote human development. From this perspective, the SST-based strategy has proved to be quite effective in responding to multiple humanitarian or development challenges in various contexts.

They are particularly effective in reducing household poverty by improving their well-being (INS, 2009). This flexibility has led to many successes, prompting the international community to urge and support African countries to set up or strengthen their social transfer systems.

¹L'emploi du qualificatif « sociaux » indique que la source du transfert est l'Etat. En plus, il est inconditionnel, direct, régulier et prévisible et sert à soutenir le développement ; ce qui le différencie des transferts humanitaires dont l'objectif vise à sauver des vies dans le court terme.

Corresponding Author:- Abdou Bagna Amadou

Address:- Département de Géographie, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Université Abdou Moumouni, BP 10963, Niamey, Niger.

Since 2011, with the support of the World Bank, Niger has been developing and implementing its² social cash transfer programme with a view to protection and prevention by helping vulnerable households to smooth out their food consumption.

The programme has two main components: *cash transfers* (CT) and *cash for work* (CFW). The cash transfer programme, the subject of our study, consists of transferring exclusively monetary resources³ to people at risk of or suffering from food insecurity or poverty in order to facilitate their access to food. This programme, which is based on targeting⁴, also has a certain specificity; like most African programmes, it is based on strong involvement of local people in its implementation (Moore et al., 2012). Although this approach is considered to have many advantages, it is also the source of numerous problems, resulting from contradictions between the principles of the intervention and the main local players involved in its implementation (De Sardan, 2013).

Today, SSTs represent a major political and social challenge, as they are one of the key tools underpinning Niger's social protection strategy, which is defined as a set of measures and practices that make it possible to guarantee sustainable sources of income for people, particularly the poor, so that they can adapt to all forms of shock (Moore et al., 2012). According to the European Report on Development (2010), this model of social protection can only be achieved if it is based on a harmonised framework that exploits the synergies between different sectoral programmes and other development initiatives. While this new dynamic is gradually gaining ground, the question of the viability of such a framework remains unanswered. This will depend on a number of factors, including the clear perception and acceptance of local populations of the various instruments of this social protection system, in particular SSTs. This article addresses this issue by examining some of its related aspects, in particular the ways in which the money received by programme beneficiaries is managed and used, and the main problems they face. It presents the results of research carried out in the field with beneficiaries of the first phase of the project (2012-2019) in the rural commune of Karofane in south-eastern Ader.

1. Location of the study area

The rural commune of Karofane covers an area of around 610 km² and lies between meridians 6°30 and 6°31 and parallels 14°16 and 14°25. It is bordered to the east by the department of Dakoro, to the north by the commune of Baban Katami, to the west by the commune of Bouza and to the south by the department of Madaoua. This commune has a number of economic characteristics, including agriculture, livestock breeding, commerce and handicrafts. Beyond these aspects, the rural exodus is a sector that is generating real social movements. The people involved in these migrations are young people, adults, the elderly over forty and, in rare cases, women who join their husbands. However, each of these activities plays an important role in the local economy in general, and in the mobilization of fiscal resources in particular.

²Au Niger, le programme est connu sous le nom de *Filets sociaux* mis en œuvre sous forme de projet rattaché au cabinet du premier ministre.

³Il s'agissait d'un transfert de 10.000FCFA par mois pendant deux ans ; aujourd'hui le montant est revu à 15.000FCFA.

⁴Le terme ici désigne le processus d'identification et de sélection des villages et des ménages bénéficiaires.

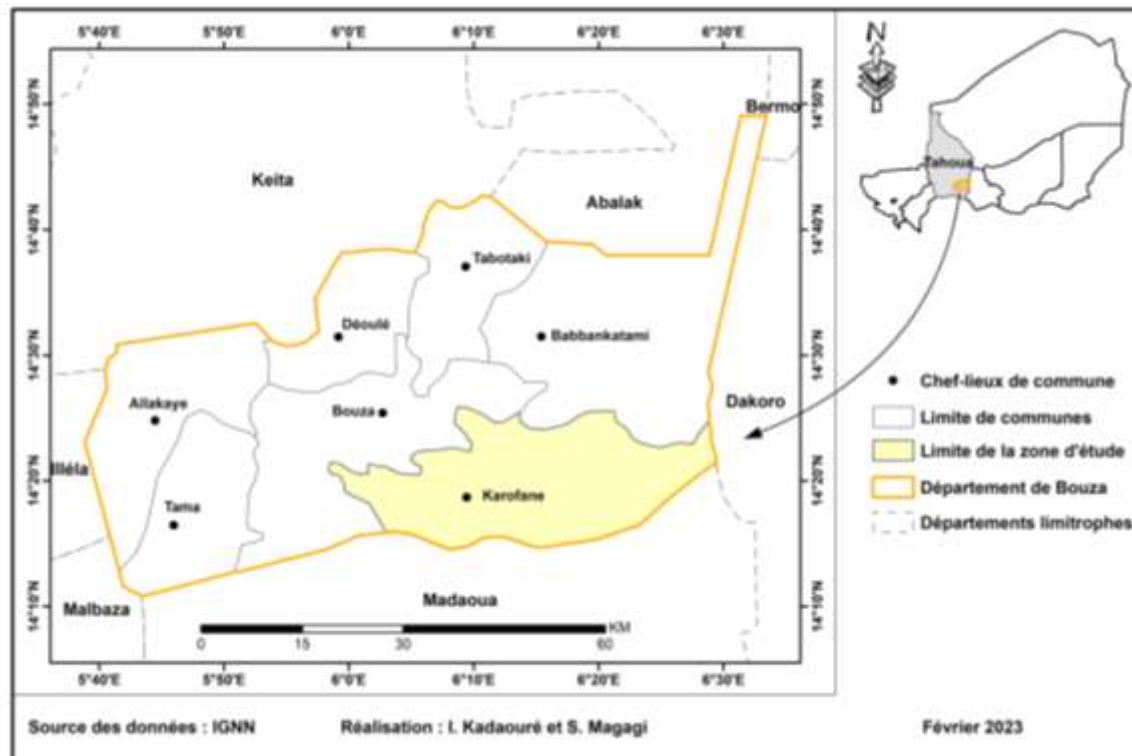


Fig 1.1.-: Location of the study area.

Methodology:-

Our methodological approach consists of a pre-survey, a field survey and participant observation.

The pre-investigation

This stage enabled us to review all the knowledge acquired in the field of social cash transfers in general, focusing on the main data collection methods and tools used. It consisted of a sort of documentary review supplemented by field observation with the aim of understanding certain local realities and those linked to the project, generally little or not addressed by the evaluation reports, such as the logics of the various local stakeholders, their interrelationships, and the points that set them against each other in the context of this cash intervention. To do this, we used a number of data collection tools, including individual interviews and focus groups.

The field survey

It was carried out using two types of tool: a questionnaire containing a variety of questions addressed to the beneficiary households, and a general interview guide designed to gather the views of the population as a whole. We also organised specific discussions with certain key players, in particular traditional chiefs, complaints management committees and women's groups, to gather their views on their roles, the difficulties they encounter and the initiatives developed to deal with them. The survey took place in March 2022 and covered all the villages benefiting from the project.

Table 1:- Survey sample.

N ^o	Liste des villages bénéficiaires	Nombre total de ménages bénéficiaires	Nombre de ménages enquêtés	Pourcentage (%)
1	Guidanbaoule	123	27	9
2	Galba	198	43	14,33
3	Matchouda	132	29	9,66
4	Taraouraou	231	50	16,7
5	Jankadami	104	23	7,66
6	Karofane	68	15	5

7	Leimat	81	18	6
8	Wakawa	57	12	4
9	Sabon Gari	189	41	13,66
10	Sabon Sara Yamma	43	10	3,33
11	Kouroutou Yamma	147	32	10,66
	TOTAL	1373	300	100

The sample was calculated using the following Bernoulli formula:

$$n = \frac{(1,96)^2 N}{(1,96)^2 + I^2(N-1)}$$

$$n = \frac{(1,96)^2 N}{(1,96)^2 + 1,96^2(N-1)} = 1373$$

Where N = total population; I = acceptable error; 1.96 = Z score which reflects the degree of confidence.

The data was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative analysis enabled us to highlight the variables relating to the profile of the beneficiaries. A data-entry mask was designed using *Sphinx Plus* software to obtain statistical data: cross-tabulations between variables, frequencies and graphs.

Résultats et Discussion:-

Socio-demographic characteristics of households

This study looked at the profile of beneficiary households by analysing certain discriminating variables, in particular age, marital status, household size and composition, and level of education. The analysis revealed five (5) categories of beneficiary households: monogamous households, which constitute the largest group with a proportion of 47%; polygamous households, which represent 34.7%; single-parent households, including widowed, divorced and separated women, which represent 15.7%, 2% and 0.3% of the sample respectively. Male-headed households accounted for 81.7% of the households surveyed, compared with 18.3% of female-headed households.

These households are mainly in the 30-34, 34-39, 44-49 and 50-54 age groups, with a peak in the 40-44 age group.

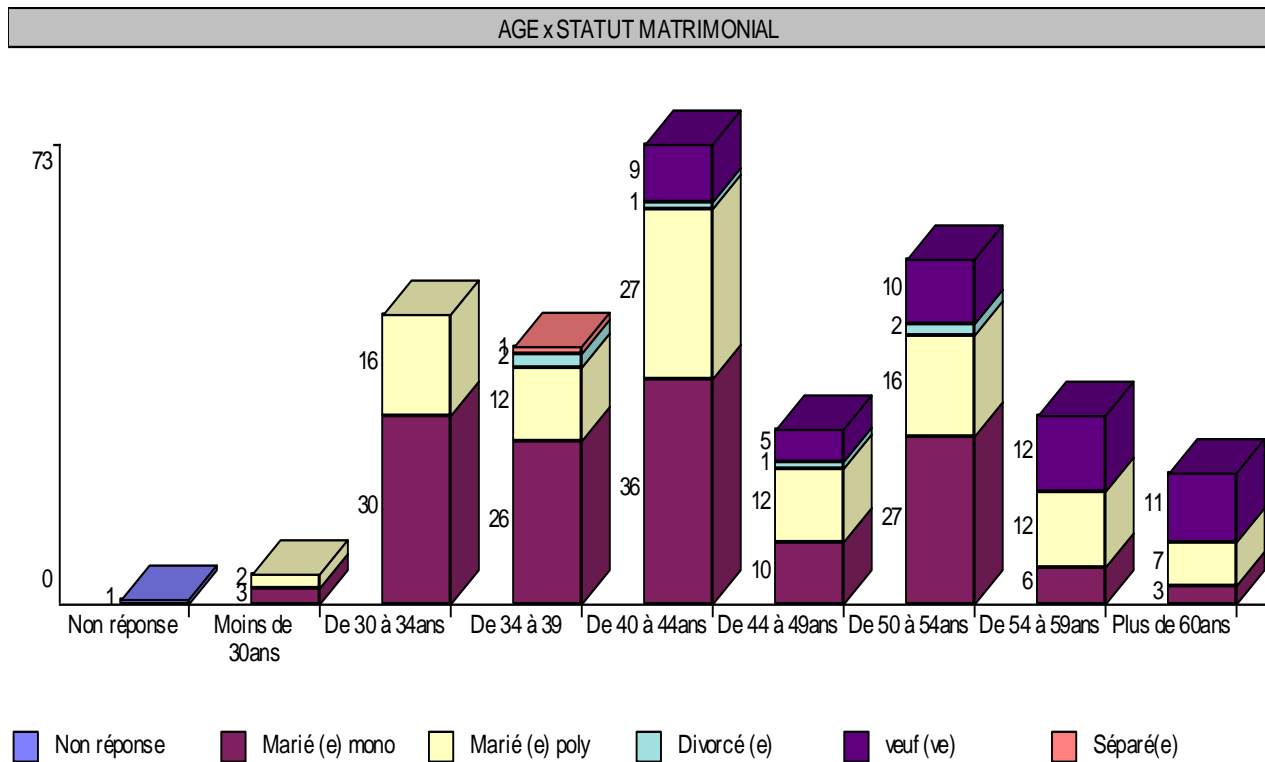


Fig.1.2:- Relationship between marital status and age of beneficiaries.

Source: Field survey, March 2022

In terms of level of education, 64.66% of beneficiaries have a basic knowledge of the Koran, 23.66% have no education at all, 7.33% have primary education, 2.66% have secondary education and 1.33% are literate. In addition, 90% of women who have attended modern school are young, i.e. in the 40-44 age group. Conversely, over 90% of women with no education are aged 40-44 or over.

As for household size, the survey results also show that 89.7% of beneficiary households (*all categories combined*) have more than five dependents. Beneficiary households with fewer than four (4) dependants accounted for only 10% of respondents. By cross-referencing the level of education and household size, we can see that the link is fairly significant. The demographic behaviour of beneficiary households is largely dependent on their level of education; the proportion of households with a high demographic weight is greater in the category of households of women with no education at all or with only a basic knowledge of the Koran than in households of women who are literate or who have attended modern school.

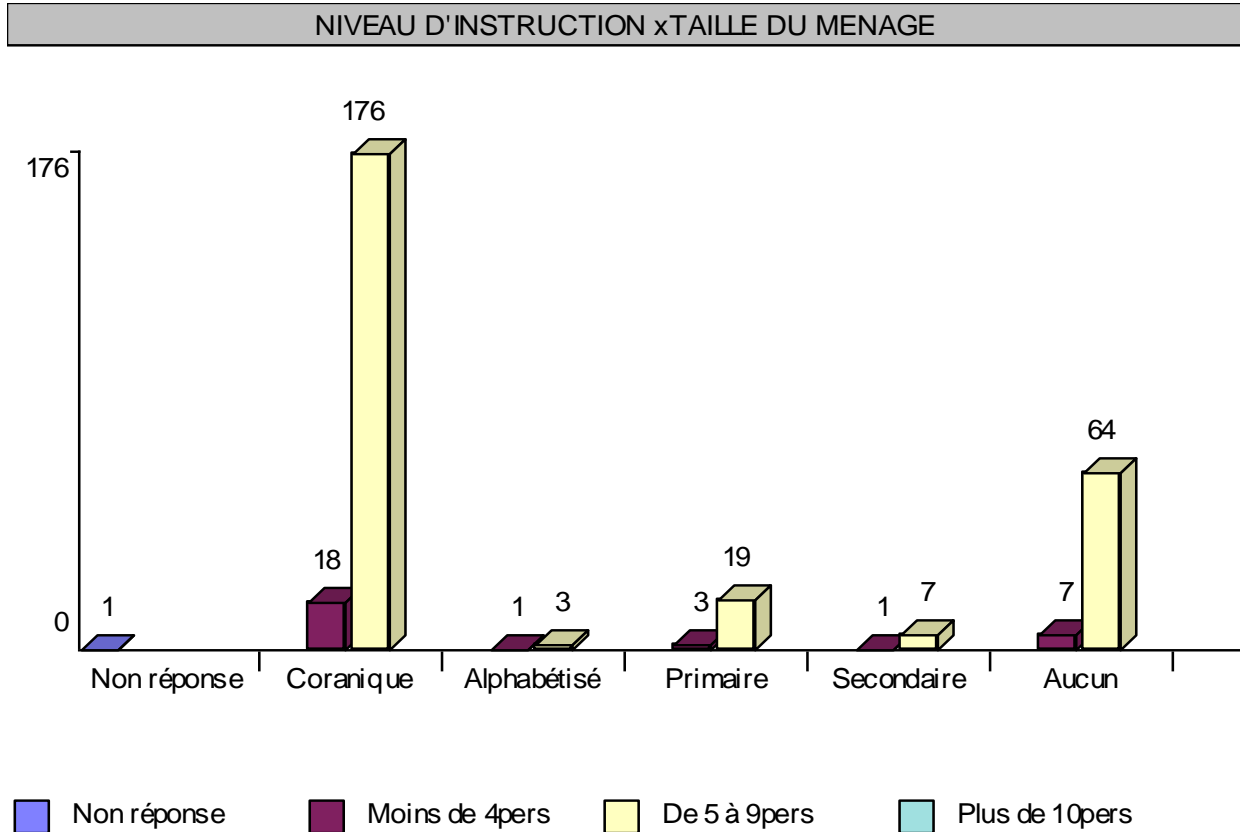


Fig.1.3:- Relationship between level of education and household size.
Source: Field survey, 2022

Household size can also be assessed using the number of children under 5. Given their specificity in relation to other household members, children can be a potential factor in household vulnerability. Thus, 69% of households surveyed have at least one child under the age of 5; 15.7% have more than three (3) children under the age of 5. Only 15% of women said they had no children under 5 in their households. Thus, the characteristics of the beneficiaries presented above typically reflect those described by QUIBB_2005 with regard to the poverty profile in Niger. This leads us to say that we are dealing with vulnerable households in poverty, the main targets of the social safety net programme in Niger.

Management and use of transfers

There is a diversity of ways in which the transfer is managed and used by beneficiary households, which may be one of the direct consequences of the perceptions of the various community players regarding cash transfers in general.

Community perceptions of TSM

Social cash transfers are appreciated and perceived in different ways by community players, both in terms of their objectives and the way they are implemented. There is not enough divergence of opinion regarding the objectives of cash transfer programmes (CTPs) and their benefits. Each community stakeholder interviewed displayed a certain knowledge of the general objective pursued, i.e. to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable households in the face of multiple shocks, particularly climatic shocks, by improving their access to basic food products. However, there are contradictions between the methodological principles used by the implementing body to select villages and beneficiary households, the eligibility criteria and the terms of access to the transfer. Targeting, i.e. the process of selecting villages and households, is the main point that raises misunderstandings, as it is very poorly perceived by some stakeholders, particularly village chiefs. As key players and repositories of public power at community level, village chiefs must be fully involved in the decision-making process relating to the various project activities that concern their communities.

This is not the case, as they understand it, with the social cash transfer programme (STTP), where their participation is in name only, as it is very limited in terms of representing the interests of their constituents spread across several administrative villages and attached hamlets, whether or not they are covered by the intervention. Thus, the targeting method based on geographical and residence criteria is categorically criticised by the traditional chiefs, who consider it to be contrary to the traditional rules in force in terms of support for populations based exclusively on administrative criteria. According to them, the application of these latter criteria enables them to reach their constituents first, without distinction and regardless of their place of residence, before considering as a last resort, if resources allow, households that are resident but under the authority of other village chiefs. For them, this means that the use of any targeting method other than the one described above is seen as a potentially serious factor with consequences such as the erosion of their power, tax evasion and the loosening of feelings of belonging to the group. But behind these allegations lie the real motivations of these customary leaders, some beneficiaries confirm. They want *"to have some control over the programme in their villages by making deductions from beneficiaries' transfers, as a sign of recognition and allegiance to their authority, which has become a common practice and a source of many problems"*.

The heads of households (in this case, the men), on the other hand, have the opposite perception to that of the women, especially in terms of how to access the transfer. They have difficulty adhering to the logic of the intervention based on the 5 gender approach, which makes women's participation an essential condition for access to the programme. Far from favouring the conditions for better use of the transfer, men believe that this strategy is a means of widening women's scope of action and room for manoeuvre within households, to their detriment. Seen from this angle, they see STTPs as tools for helping, in essence, to improve women's image, which has been tarnished by the daily hardships to which they are subjected, by offering them enormous opportunities to fulfil their individual and collective aspirations. This vision, defended by many women, is widely shared by the population as a whole, who cynically describe the transfer as "women's money" because of their privileged position as the interface between households and the project.

These arguments defended and developed by these players, although they explicitly or implicitly reflect their interests, give a glimpse of the complexity and existence of the problems surrounding cash transfer operations and the way the transfer is managed.

Transfer management methods

Transfer management methods vary according to the socio-demographic and economic characteristics of the recipient households. The transfer is a resource provided by the State to help the household meet the food and nutritional needs of its members. It is therefore a shared financial resource that must be under the responsibility of the head, according to the principles of the intervention. The head decides on the organisation and direction to be given to the management and use of the transfer. In practice, beneficiaries try to get round this formal principle by adopting strategies that are specific to their way of life. For example, some heads of household remain indifferent to the logic of the programme by entrusting their wives with the responsibility of management, a sign of the consideration and good relations that exist between them. In this case, they have total control over the transfer and also decide how it is used.

To meet the challenge, they use various management strategies⁶ to meet the household's expectations. This consensual way of managing the transfer, although it increases the women's workload, helps develop their sense of self-esteem and strengthens their capacity for action.

For other heads of household, and there are fewer of them, the transfer is an important resource that it is very risky to leave to be managed by the wife, who is thinking only of her own personal needs. They exercise exclusive control over the transfer, completely ignoring the role their wives could play in making better use of it. In this case, the woman is totally absent from the management of the transfer, which is entrusted only with executive tasks. Under these conditions, women are less committed, with little motivation to think about and develop strategies for mobilising resources in order to contribute effectively to meeting household needs. For these women, it is difficult to seize the opportunities offered by SSTs to improve their living conditions.

Women heads of household, on the other hand, are best placed to adopt an attitude of real change. The transfer is an additional resource that they can manage as they see fit. They are more rigorous in terms of management because of their weak support network, which is partly the source of their vulnerability. As a result, they develop tricks that enable them to meet their needs during the time between two payments, whatever the number of days.

The wives of migrants⁷ display ambivalent behaviour. Some appear to be a little less rigorous in the management and use of the transfer because of the financial support they periodically receive from their husbands to feed the household. For these women, who have no real ambition to invest, the transfer is simply an opportunity they can seize to satisfy material needs that are not covered by their husbands. Others, on the other hand, whose husbands' support has been insignificant or non-existent for years, use the transfer to develop strategies such as small-scale IGAs and the use of agricultural labour, which enable them to meet both the food and non-food needs of their households.

Forms of transfer use

There are several ways of using the transfer, some more developed than others, and these largely reflect the socio-demographic characteristics of the beneficiaries:

Use of transfers outside the household:

This practice is very rare. Generally speaking, transfers are used to meet the needs of households that are virtually in a vulnerable situation. This explains to a large extent why the head of the household or his representative, in this case his wife, is unable or unwilling to spend money other than on items that directly concern the household.

Sharing between members of the household:

This is an even less frequent phenomenon, which is generally observed in certain households, particularly polygamous households, where the head is regularly absent, and which allows the transfer to be shared between the two wives. In this way, each receives her share of the cake in proportion to the number of children she looks after. The same applies if one of the wives is separated or divorced and has dependent children. In this case, the cash is also shared equally between the two wives, in keeping with the spirit of the accompanying measures of the project's Cash Transfers for Resilience programme.

One-off purchase of a product:

Most of the beneficiaries are vulnerable people who have difficulty accessing food at any time of year. They spend most of their income on food to keep their households afloat. For many households, food is the only item of expenditure to which the entire transfer is regularly allocated. In some circumstances, the recipient may have already used up the entire transfer by buying food on credit from a village shopkeeper before the next payment. As a result, many households are in a kind of vicious circle, which is an insurmountable barrier for women living in an environment where opportunities are very slim.

Multiple purchases of products:

This is the most widespread form. It involves dividing the transfer between different expenditure items that are essential for the household's needs. These may include the purchase of food, vegetables, condiments, milk and other products for everyday consumption. Education-related expenses are also included: recreation money, recurring SMC requests, the purchase of school supplies, and so on. Sometimes, part of the transfer is invested to improve

household income. This type of organisation and distribution of income between essential expenses shows that households are adopting food diversification strategies, which are vital for improving food and nutritional security.

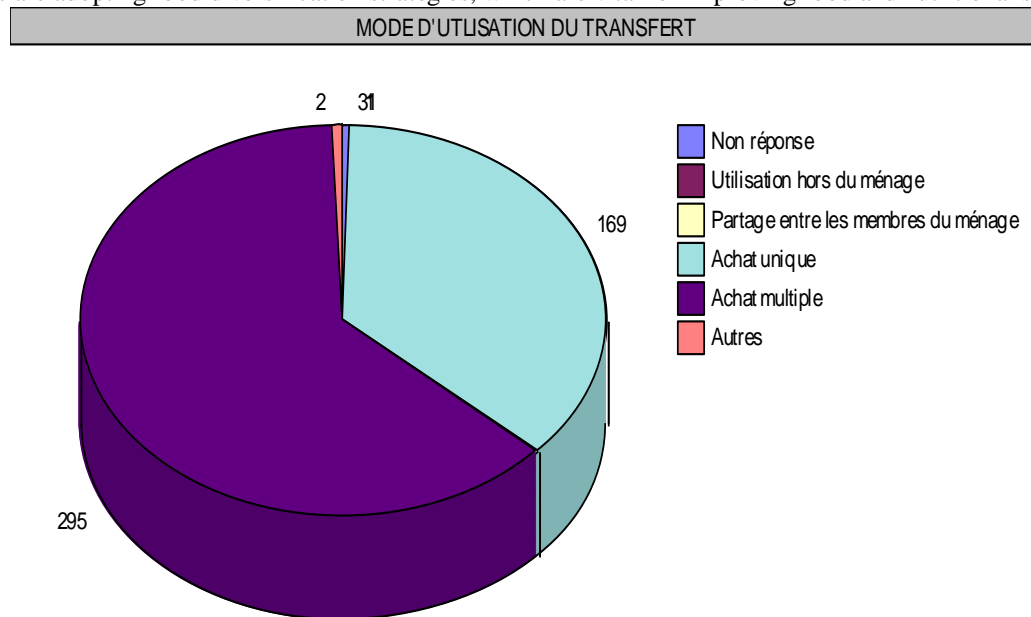


Fig.1.4 :-Transfer use modes

Source: Field survey, 2022

Problems associated with cash transfers

Monetary aid, despite the benefits it brings, also generates numerous problems at both individual (i.e. household) and collective level. The consequences of these problems can linger long after the intervention has ended. They can be grouped into three (3) distinct categories in terms of their nature and the scale they take on. These are problems relating to the selection of beneficiaries, problems relating to the management of the transfer and conflicts of interest.

Targeting: a poorly understood tool for combating poverty

Targeting is a set of activities carried out in three stages to identify households that are potential beneficiaries of the intervention. This is also the phase when the results of the survey are criticised, if not contested, by the people living in the villages selected (*centre or mother villages*) when they have fewer beneficiary households in the quota than the hamlets attached to them, often because of their favourable geographical position, or by certain groups of people (one family or several families) who consider themselves eligible but none of their households is selected following the ranking of the households surveyed according to their PMT score⁸ (*proxy mean test*). They will rightly or wrongly accuse the village chief of colluding with either the surveyors, the project and/or the communal authorities to favour or penalise one group or another. As a result, it often happens that the group that has been penalised leaves the chief, handing over their family cards and going elsewhere to register with another chief. This painful departure leaves indelible scars on the age-old relationships between them. In certain circumstances, therefore, the transfer of money is a cruel dilemma for village chiefs, who are unable to defend themselves against the incomprehension of a population tempted by the desire to benefit from the State's manna.

Faced with this setback, and in the hope of saving their honour, the village chiefs turned against the municipality, accusing it of bias in its treatment of the villages, based, in their view, more on political considerations than on purely humanitarian or development needs. They put forward a number of arguments to justify their accusation, such as the failure to comply with the village pre-selection criteria, the unilateral attachment of hamlets to the villages selected, etc.

Transfer management, another imbroglio for some beneficiaries

These are the most frequent problems, occurring from the first payment to the end of the intervention. There is a lack of understanding and misunderstanding between spouses, co-spouses, parents-in-law and wives about how to

manage the money received, which has a negative impact on the running of the household. Each partner wanted to have total control over the money, trying to carve out a large share for himself or herself or monopolising it unilaterally. This sometimes gives rise to serious tensions within the household, with the only victim being the legitimate representative of the household, i.e. the wife, who is criticised, insulted, humiliated and often repudiated when she resists the decisions of the husband or parents-in-law.

Conflicts of interest

The transfer is generally perceived by all the community players as a windfall that needs to be better exploited. This is why the village chiefs impose a levy, in collaboration with the members of the complaints management committee (CGP) and under the powerless gaze of the project agent, to mobilise large sums of money during each distribution. Their argument is that it is thanks to them that the beneficiaries have had the chance or opportunity to access the programme, so they should be accountable for that. So it's more a mark of recognition than allegiance when they agree to give up a percentage to the chief, however small. Such an idea seems to be misunderstood by many of the beneficiaries, who fiercely object, castigating the chief's behaviour as being too unfair. As a result, cash transfer payment operations sometimes become moments of tug-of-war and remonstrance between the beneficiaries and their representatives (village chief, CGP and group management committee), which are factors likely to weaken social cohesion and prevent any civic commitment to collective development actions.

Discussion:-

Community actors defend ideas against intervention approaches that are conceived as objective and that negatively influence the implementation process of social cash transfers. The data collected as a result of the field survey reveals that the process of implementing the social cash transfer programme remains largely influenced by the perceptions of the main key players, who sometimes deliberately criticise the intervention methods, in particular the targeting method and the gender approach as a flexible condition for households to be able to benefit from the cash transfer. These methods are very often biased and do not meet the expectations of populations faced with increasingly frequent and intense climatic shocks. These results are consistent with the work of (Benasius, 2017; De Sardan et al., 2013), which states that the cash intervention methods used by the various operators are poorly understood and contested by local people, who perceive them as "*imposed rules that are unsuited to the local socio-cultural context*". This study also takes into account the socio-demographic characteristics of the beneficiaries, which largely explain the behaviour observed and the variety of ways in which the transfer is managed and used.

It differs from previous general studies in that they deal with all programmes without distinguishing between social transfers and humanitarian transfers. In addition, the stakeholders are positive about the programme in terms of its objectives and benefits, despite the problems associated with its implementation. The survey revealed that most of the money received is under the control of the women, who decide how to use it according to their needs. The transfer is used in various expenditure items or invested to improve household income. These results confirm previous studies by several authors (Skovdal et al., 2017; Fenn et al., 2014; Hoddinott et al. 2018; Bastagli, 2016; Handa et al. 2022; Chilufya, 2020). They also show that despite these opportunities for women to acquire a degree of autonomy, the fact remains that they regularly fall victim to their interface role, which is very poorly understood by the population.

Conclusion:-

The ambiguity surrounding the community's perception of social cash transfers is indicative of the vulnerable situation in which beneficiary households find themselves in the study area. Each stakeholder, depending on his or her social position, forms an idea in a desperate attempt to assert his or her interests, deliberately ignoring the principles of the intervention. The result is enormous, multi-faceted difficulties throughout the programme implementation process, which can act as a brake on the production of potentially lasting effects once the intervention is over. This can also be a factor in the risks that increase the climatic vulnerability of households in this area.

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