

## **It buys food but does it change gender relations? Child Support Grants in Soweto, South Africa**

**Leila Patel and Tessa Hochfeld**

*A gender lens was applied in an empirical study to assess the dynamics and policy implications of one of South Africa's largest social protection programmes, the Child Support Grant (CSG). The findings are based on a household survey conducted in an urban community in Soweto, South Africa. They suggest that the grant supports women's ability to control and allocate resources, and that this has a positive impact on household food security. While the CSG eases women's burden of care and responsibility for household and child survival, women remain largely responsible for caring and looking after families. This prevails despite increased opportunities for women in society and some small shifts in gender relations in urban areas. Social protection policies such as the CSG do not on their own transform gender relations. To ensure that they contribute to gender transformation, they need to work in concert with other public policies that are specifically designed to support changes toward gender equality.*

**Key words:** gender and social protection; Child Support Grants; gender relations; social policies

### **Introduction**

Historically, social benefits in South Africa have been paid to the woman in a family if she is seen as suffering the results of a loss of income earning capacity of the male breadwinner, resulting from illness, disability, death or disappearance. The rationale for this rested on assumptions about the distinct social roles of men and women in the family and wider society. These assumptions included the notion that men are primary breadwinners for the household, while women are the primary carers, whose activities in the productive sphere simply supplement the main family income earned by men.

In South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, basing social protection programmes on this model of gender relations has been found to be inappropriate, due to the many differences– and constant changes – in demographic, social and economic realities, including those arising from the challenges of mass poverty and inequality facing a post apartheid society.

This article reports on a study that aimed to look beyond the statistics on women receiving the South African Child Support Grant, on behalf of children, to explore the gender dynamics in CSG households. The research examined the impact of the CSG on gender relations and the empowerment of women, in poor urban households in Soweto (1).

### **The South African Child Support Grant**

Of the 14.6 million South Africans who receive a monthly cash grant from the state, over 10.1 million are recipients of the Child Support Grant (CSG) (South African Social Security Agency, 2011, p. 7). The CSG, initiated in 1997, pays a small monthly cash amount to poor children under the age of 16 years old via their primary caregivers.

The CSG is publicly funded, and means-tested. Income eligibility criteria have been steadily relaxed, which allows for the inclusion of a large sector of the population of poor children in South Africa (Neves, Samson, Niekerk, Hlatshwayo, & Toit, 2009). There has been a very good uptake of the CSG nationally, and it is generally acknowledged that the grant is well targeted, with an excellent reach of poor children (Voster & de Waal, 2008). While the CSG was conceived of as unconditional, a recent amendment to the policy requires child beneficiaries to attend school (Regulation Government Gazette No. 919227, R.S.A., 27 November 2009), an odd requirement in a country of almost universal primary school attendance (Lund, 2011).

A number of studies have shown that poverty has been reduced in households receiving a CSG, and the grant has also been shown to improve the nutritional intake (Agüero, Carter, & Woolard, 2006) and school attendance amongst child beneficiaries (Samson et al., 2008). Further, it seems that the CSG might have labour-promoting effects, in that it can improve a woman's capacity to go out and look for work, access credit, or can act as seed capital to kick-start income generation (Neves, et al., 2009). This resonates with international literature which promotes cash transfers as a stimulus for economic activities (Barrientos & Sherlock, 2002). As with the Old Age Pension, CSG income is pooled in households so economic benefits, while smaller for the intended recipient, accrue well beyond that individual to support whole households (Delany, Ismail, Graham, & Ramkisson, 2008).

Overall, research seems to suggest that CSG households are more vulnerable than non-CSG households in the following ways: they are larger, have less access to services, are predominantly black South Africans (2), have lower levels of education, have less access to employment or income generation (Delany, et al., 2008). It seems that the probability that a child will receive the CSG depends on the presence of the child's biological mother in his or her life (Case, Hosegood, & Lund, 2003). Also, CSG children are more likely to live with their biological mothers only than with both parents or just with their biological fathers (Delany, et al., 2008).

The CSG is a progressive innovation that was designed to break with the 'male bread winner model' underpinning social protection policies in South Africa. It has pioneered the unique principle of 'Follow the Child'; therefore the beneficiary child's primary caregiver, whomever that might be, collects the grant on his/her behalf. Ninety six per cent of recipients are, in fact, women (Voster & de Waal, 2008). A majority of these women are the biological mothers of the children (ibid). Hence, we can say that the grant, which was conceived as a gender-neutral,

child-centred cash transfer, has been ‘feminised’, and that this has happened because of the fact that in South African society, the overwhelming expectation is that women should provide primary care for children. The CSG was not, however, specifically designed to engage with or shift gender relations in the household.

The next section provides some context for our study by briefly discussing social protection programmes - and cash transfers in particular – in relation to the goals of women’s empowerment and gender equality.

### **Putting the ‘social’ back into social protection**

It is increasingly recognised, internationally and locally, that more needs to be known about the gendered effects of social protection measures, which stretch beyond their technical objectives (Lund, 2006) . Women and men experience poverty and vulnerability differently. This means they have different social and economic needs, and they experience the effects of social protection programmes differently.

The prevalence of social protection programmes is rising in developing countries, as a response to poverty. Cash transfers, in particular, are popular. The motivations behind these programmes are usually a combination of the technocratic (for example, wanting to reduce numbers of poor people in the population), political (such as using the programme to garner support for parties or policies), or ideological (an expressed commitment to values of humanitarianism and economic rights) (Devereux & White, 2010). It is unusual, however, to see programmes that have expressed objectives that go beyond economic support or income protection. This limitation reflects the (much-criticised) notion that poverty is merely a lack of income. In research and policy debates focusing on social protection, recognition is growing that social protection needs to reflect a more holistic understanding of poverty, as ‘not only about income, but about social risks such as discrimination, unequal distribution of resources and power in households and limited citizenship’ (Holmes & Jones, 2010, p. 1). But this growing appreciation of complexity on the part of researchers is as yet poorly matched by social protection programmes, which do not tend to target the social barriers to women’s equal economic participation, including gender-fair distribution of resources.

If one acknowledges the broader potential of social protection as an ethical project (Hassim, 2008), not only to provide an income safety net, but to also contribute to social justice by addressing social risks and vulnerabilities, as rights-based approaches to social protection do (Künnemann & Leonhard, 2008), then improving gender equity is a legitimate social protection goal. Rachel Sabates-Wheeler and Stephen Devereux (2008 p. 70), term this approach ‘transformative’ social protection, where “transformative” refers to the need to pursue

policies that integrate individuals equally into society, allowing everyone to take advantage of the benefits of growth and enabling excluded or marginalised groups to claim their rights’.

Gender relations are both complex and intractable, and it is becoming increasingly clear that improving gender inequality indirectly, instrumentally, or via marginal objectives is highly unlikely (Chant, 2008). It is for these reasons that scholars and practitioners argue that principles of gender justice should be core objectives of social protection programmes, and that these have to be purposively incorporated into the programme design and implementation plan for any hope of success (Kabeer, Mumtaz, & Sayeed, 2010). At most, many programmes assume that because they target women, this will, in itself, address gender inequality (Holmes & Jones, 2010). In fact, there is abundant evidence that targeting women, or ‘feminising’ anti-poverty programmes, can sometimes result in *increasing* a woman’s burdens (Chant, 2008) via an intensification of her roles and responsibilities within and outside the household. This means that frequently ‘women’s unpaid labour is exploited to subsidise state failures’ (Hassim, 2008, p. 115). Sylvia Chant (2008) further argues that the discourse of the ‘feminisation of poverty’ that is pervasive across international development literature should be re-thought in order for it to be more relevant to women’s real lives, particularly due to the mounting responsibilities and obligations that women face in coping with the burden of poverty.

Cash transfers are widely believed to be ‘good’ for women because they have been shown to support girls’ education, allow better access to health care and social services, and improve general household nutrition; yet the assumption that they will automatically result in women’s empowerment in the household is misguided (Hassim, 2000). In the research study, we were particularly interested in women’s views of empowerment. We were informed by Naila Kabeer’s empowerment framework (1999), and Michelle Adato, Bénédicte de la Brière, Dubravka Mindek, and Agnes Quisumbing’s (2000) indicators of empowerment, drawing on these perspectives to help us understand how women used cash resources to achieve their own goals (agency). Two important indicators of empowerment are the question of who in the household makes key decisions, and the issue of the degree to which women have control over spending and the use of resources. Other indicators of empowerment relevant for the study included women’s self-belief and perceptions (individual empowerment), women’s rights in the household, economic security and participation in the public domain.

Harnessing the synergies between social protection and other social policies is considered crucial in achieving positive gender outcomes as well as the challenge of including men in social protection (Holmes & Jones, 2010). In this regard, Chant (2008) argues correctly that there is a lack of focus on gender relations, that is power inequalities between men and women, in the private sphere as well as in the consideration of social policies and programmes.

The research study in Soweto relates its findings to some of these concepts and theoretical arguments.

## **The research methodology**

This household survey was conducted in Doornkop, Soweto, which is one of the poorest municipal areas in this region of the City of Johannesburg. The area was chosen as it is known to be a high up-take area of the CSG (de Wet, Patel, Korth, & Forrester, 2008). It consists of small houses, primarily brick or concrete, most of which have informal backyard shacks which are rented out to collect extra income for residents. Both formal and informal homes were included in our sample. The region is serviced with electricity, and piped water is available on most stands, but mainly in the form of one yard tap rather than inside the houses. Schools and health services are provided in the area. Some consumer goods can be purchased from small businesses in the area; women have to travel outside the community for the purchase of other goods and services, which involves additional transport costs.

The respondents involved in our research were all women, who were the primary caregivers of children aged 15 years old and younger. A total of 344 women were surveyed. Systematic sampling, based on the area's official ward map of municipal stands (3), and using rigorous stand selection rules, was used to select these households. This resulted in findings that are generalisable to the whole Doornkop population, and to other urban areas with a similar profile. The field work was conducted in July 2010, by trained field workers who administered the questionnaires. There was a 78 per cent response rate to the questionnaire. The sample included both beneficiary and non-beneficiary households.

The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions covering the following areas: background household information; livelihood activities and income; food security; use of and views of the grant; partner relationships; household decision-making and care responsibilities; and dimensions of women's empowerment. In this article, we report on only some aspects of the data.

Limitations of the methodology used included the fact that the results cannot be generalized to all CSG households nationally; conducting the field work on week-days excluded those with regular employment away from home; and the fact that due to the length of the questionnaire, there were some questions unanswered, which resulted in some missing data. Also, this was a quantitative study, and therefore nuances and complexities that are best captured using a qualitative research design might have been missed.

## **Our findings**

A total of 560 children received the CSG in 274 households out of the total of 344 Doornkop households surveyed. Thus, 80 per cent of households with children 15 years and younger receive a CSG, which is a very high uptake of the grant.

On average, there were 1.9 households per stand, and the average number of people in each household is 5.2. Fifty six per cent of households were female headed while 44 per cent were male headed. The majority of women beneficiaries were young, with thirty per cent between 21 and 30 years old, a further 21 per cent between 31 and 40, 24 per cent between 41 and 50 years old, and 13 per cent were between 51 and 60 years old. Caregivers who are particularly vulnerable due to their age were in the minority; 7 per cent were teenagers aged between 16 and 20 years, and 7 per cent were elderly (over 60 years old). Caregivers were looking after children who were mostly very young: 44 per cent were under five years old.

Half of respondents have a current partner and 44 per cent have no partner. Six per cent gave no information on their partner status. Most of these partner relationships are of a long-term nature: 40 per cent have lasted 5 years or longer, and most of the partners live permanently in the household. Further evidence of the stability of these relationships is that 79 per cent of partners are also the fathers of one or more of the respondents' children.

Respondents survived via a variety of livelihood activities, and their income came from multiple, diverse sources such as grants, formal and informal employment and support from outside their family. Regular income was most common via social grants, in the main the CSG and, far less so, other social grants such as the Old Age Pension. Other household members may, however, have ad hoc or regular income which was not captured in this research. Only 13 per cent of the respondents said they did regular work for a wage, salary or commission, while 23 per cent said they did occasional or irregular 'piece' work (4) for wages. A further 23 per cent ran their own small business; this includes hawking, shoe repairs, home cultivation and sale of vegetables. More than 80 per cent of respondents said they never get donations or assistance from outside their family such as via their church or NGOs. This demonstrates that incomes are in the main varied and insecure with the exception of state cash transfers.

#### *Decision making, control of resources and use*

Questions about how decisions are made in CSG households have revealed that the women receiving the grant are the primary decision-makers in the home. Three areas of decision-making were explored. First, decisions about the use of the CSG are made with women as key role-players in nearly 70 per cent of households. Seventy one percent said there is equal decision making in the household while close to half are the exclusive decision-makers about how to use the CSG money. A further 31 per cent of grant recipients report they shared this decision with their partners or other household members. Decisions about general household expenses are also made predominantly by the woman; on children's clothes, food and groceries, medical costs, 75 per cent, 72 per cent, and 66 per cent of women, respectively, say they are the main decision-makers.

Second, figure 1 below shows that the grant is being used overwhelmingly to pay for food (51 per cent always use it for food, and a further 23 per cent often or sometimes do). It is also used to pay for school fees and uniforms (38 per cent always use it for school costs, and a further 27 per cent often or sometimes do). This corroborates findings elsewhere that have shown the positive nutritional and educational effects of the grant, mentioned earlier.

FIGURE ONE HERE

Third, decision-making related to children is even more strongly the responsibility of the women, with 80 per cent indicating that they are the sole decision-makers on children's health issues; 73 per cent on children's discipline; and 72 per cent on children's education. Therefore, women who get one or more CSG control the way the money is spent, are the key decision-makers in their homes, use the grant money on food and school costs, and believe the grant has benefited them and their households positively.

### *Gender relations*

The findings on gender relations are two-fold: first, the payment of private child maintenance to women by fathers who no longer live in the household is still at very low levels, and it seems that the CSG further discourages this payment. About 30 per cent of the respondents did not live with the fathers of their children, nor were they their current partners. Of this cohort, 24 per cent of the respondents receive regular maintenance payments from the fathers of their children. These fathers therefore demonstrate an ongoing commitment to the children. However, 61 per cent of respondents indicated that they never received maintenance. The remainder infrequently receive maintenance (15 percent). This reinforces the commonly held assumption that women are responsible for children, in relation to financial support as well as care. We also wanted to establish if receipt of a CSG had any impact on the payment of maintenance by the fathers of the children. Of the total number of CSG beneficiaries, 30 per cent said the fathers of their children *no longer provide support* now that they get the grant. This is a worrying finding that needs further empirical investigation. While the 'crowding out' of remittances and other private payments by public transfers has been noted elsewhere, there has been no prior evidence of this happening in South Africa in relation to the CSG (Neves, et al., 2009).

Secondly, care and domestic responsibilities remain a woman's domain, however, men are positively engaged in family relationships. Women who had partners were generally positive about their relationships with their partners and their partner's relations with their children: 65 per cent said that they get on very well with their partner; 78 per cent said that their partners were always good to their children. This echoes other evidence from South Africa and elsewhere which shows that fathers historical disinterest in their children is slowly changing

and fathers are both more interested and more involved in family life (Richter, 2006). However, less than one-third (29 per cent) of women with partners say their partner helps with household tasks, showing that domestic work remains a woman's domain. Eighty five per cent of all the respondents interviewed indicated that they spent most of their time on care and domestic responsibilities. Just under half (49 per cent) of women with partners said their partner helped them practically with the children.

#### *Women's perspective on empowerment*

Women's views of the effect of the CSG on their own lives was found to be positive with 82% of grant recipients indicating that the grant has made their lives better, 79% believe that they can take better care of their children now they get the grant, and that the CSG contributes to family cohesion (65%). Sixty five percent believe that now that they get the grant, they would not survive if it was stopped which indicates the important contribution of the grant to economic security for women and particularly for those who do not have a partner. A further 66% of respondents believed that the grant gave them a sense of personal power and courage and 61% said that it made them feel good about themselves which are significant indicators of personal empowerment and self-belief. Therefore beneficiaries themselves are very positive about the effect the CSG has on their lives.

INSERT FIGURE TWO HERE

A further battery of questions explored women's perspectives on empowerment in general, which suggest that women have high self-belief (78 per cent), express their opinions freely and believe that they have the right to do so (71 per cent), and have fairly high levels of participation in societies such as savings groups, burial societies and church groups (64 per cent) and community meetings (75 per cent). However, while women scored high on some of the dimensions of empowerment, they still seem to subscribe to traditional ideas of gender norms and roles in the household. In this regard, 87 per cent of our respondents were of the view that women are better at looking after the family than men, 83 per cent believe women are more concerned about children's care than men. They thus continue to accept that it is a woman's duty to perform the bulk of reproductive labour in the households. Half of the respondents also believe that women should 'know their place' in the home. Further, 23 per cent of respondents indicated that they were always (6%), often (6%) or sometimes (12%) afraid of their partners (fear of partners is a proxy for the existence of domestic violence), and almost 9 per cent of respondents indicated that they were sometimes hit by their partners. It can be assumed that in households where domestic violence is present, women's decision-making, self-esteem, and ability to control their lives and resources might be partly or severely constrained.



## Conclusions

In conclusion, the CSG provides a valuable safety net to poor households, with significant benefits for both women and children. Since the majority of beneficiaries spend the grant on food, it contributes to household food security, and provides some financial security to women independent of their partners. The grant also provides women with the flexibility and choice in how the money is spent. This confirms previous assertions that money directed to women beneficiaries have had a positive multiplier effect on women's status and the well-being of the children in their care. This assertion is supported by research elsewhere that show that women's spending patterns benefit not only children (UNICEF, 2006) but also the whole family and household (Kabeer, 1994). Furthermore, the grant eases women's burdens of coping with poverty, care and domestic responsibilities and obligations. The impact of the CSG on their own lives was experienced positively and the grant contributed to women's empowerment assessed against a number of empowerment indicators.

Three challenges emerged from the study: first, women remain largely responsible for care and domestic inputs which remain unacknowledged and invisible in evaluation studies of the CSG. Unpaid care work by women in South Africa is equivalent to between 11% and 30% of GDP depending on what type of measure is used (Budlender, 2010). A better understanding is needed of the impact of the CSG on care as a public good that contributes to economic and social development and that extends beyond the individual beneficiary.

Second, despite evidence of men's positive engagement in family relationships when they are living in households with women and children, inequality in gender relations remain largely unchanged. This was particularly evident in the absence of payment of private maintenance by the fathers of the children not living with them and the possible displacement of maintenance by the grant. More research is needed in this area including male beneficiary perspectives. The reason why so few men are taking up the CSG needs to be better understood as well as, when they do receive it, how it is used, and its impact.

Finally, while gender relations (like all social relations) are constantly changing, the research reminds us of the complexity of changing socio-cultural gendered beliefs and attitudes and that men and women are likely to hold both progressive and contradictory views about gender relations at the same time. We therefore conclude that social protection policies may contribute to transforming gender relations; however, on their own, they are limited, and need to work in concert with other public policies, such as the reform of the maintenance system and policies and programmes that reduce the burden of care on women and that promote more equitable social relations.

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## Endnotes

[1] Soweto is a large, poor township South West of Johannesburg designated for black urban dwellers by apartheid city planners.

[2] Apartheid's racial categories continue to influence South African society due to the legacy of economic, geographic and social separation, and therefore the term 'black' denotes people of African descent to differentiate from those of 'Indian' or 'mixed race' descent.

[3] By municipal stand we refer to individual units of land designated for residential use by city planners.

[4] 'Piece work' is a term used in South Africa for ad hoc once-off employment from an hour to a few days in duration. It is particularly common amongst domestic workers and labourers.

[5] This figure is based on results from a 5 point Likert Scale. Here we have reflected only the data for those who 'Strongly agreed' and 'Agreed' with the statements.

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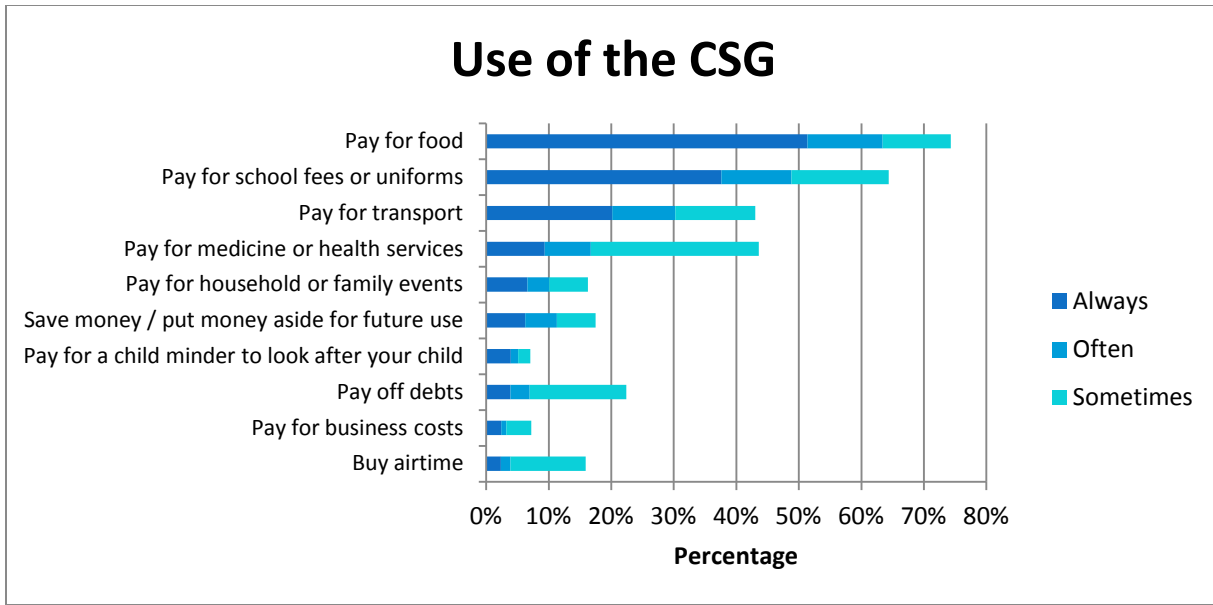
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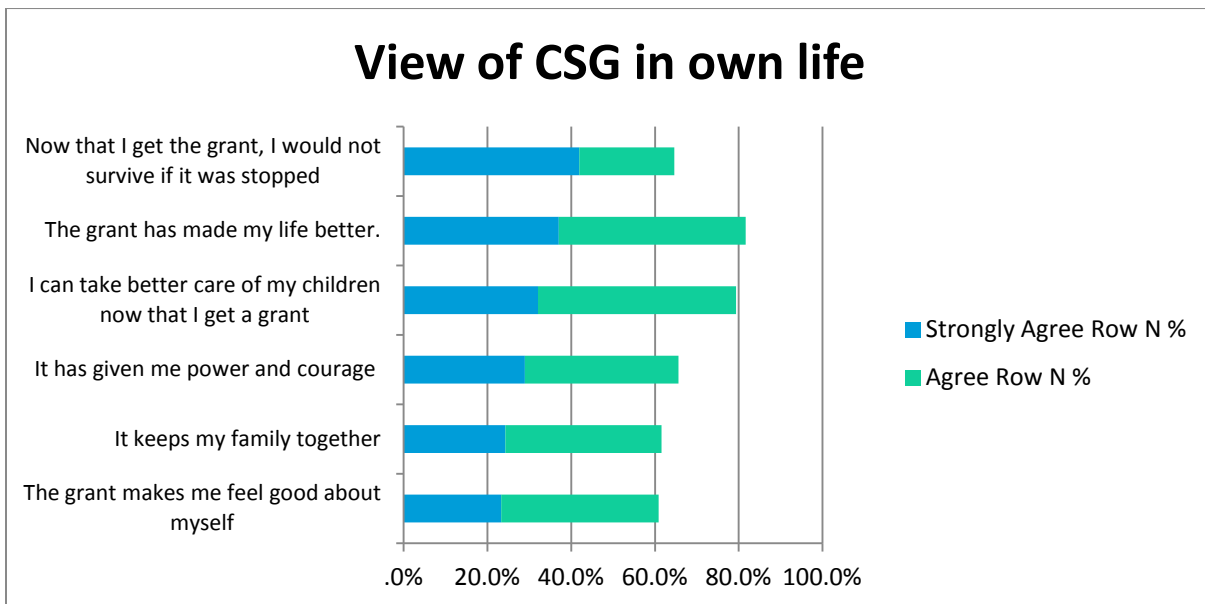
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**Figure 1: How the CSG is used**



**Figure 2: Respondents' views of how the CSG has affected their own lives (5)**