Promoting Water Security Through Social Protection: Insights from Ghana's LEAP Program

July 2025

Policy Brief

Executive Summary

- The Northern part of Ghana continues to face persistent inadequate access to safe drinking water.
- Cash transfers provided through the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) – beneficiaries use a social protection program to address issues of water insecurity.
- Recognizing the linkage between cash transfers and water security can enhance water security and build household resilience against water-related risk.

The Issue

Water insecurity continues to be a pressing issue, particularly among the most vulnerable populations, threatening both human health and well-being (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Despite two decades of global water policy interventions, two billion people in the world still lack safely managed drinking water. Half of these individuals live in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (United Nations Children's Fund [UN], 2021). To address these challenges, gender-sensitive programs like **Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP)** are needed. The Government of Ghana implemented this social protection program in 2008. LEAP provides cash grants to vulnerable groups, promoting access to water, and helping people adopt coping strategies. This policy brief highlights the role of LEAP in promoting water access among its beneficiaries and the coping strategies they adopt to stay secure. The findings and policy recommendations presented here are based on data collected from LEAP beneficiaries in the Upper West Region (UWR).

Key Results

- **Cash Transfers and Water Security.**
- **Purchasing Water.**
- **Contributing to Repairs of Boreholes.**
- **Purchasing Storage Containers.**

LEAP and Coping with Water Security

- **Borrowing money to fetch water**
- **Borrowing water from other households**
- **Fetching water on credit at the standpipe**

Cash Transfers and Water Security

The LEAP cash grant has facilitated women's acquisition of safe water from the standpipes. Safe water from the standpipes essential for drinking and domestic purposes such as cleaning and cooking. Similar findings are reported in Renzaho et al. (2018) and Samson et al. (2004).

"There are times when you collect money, you become very happy. You can fetch water from the standpipes and get some to prepare food for the house." (Faiza, 59)

In addition to access to water, the money received was also used to purchase household water storage containers, which they use to store water inside. The storage containers can help protect households from the dangers of waterborne illnesses and contamination, and reduce the time spent by women and girls to access water (Anderson et al., 2021)

"I bought water containers with the LEAP cash grant to store water. Also, I bought basins that we will use to collect water from the borehole and the taps." (Fauzia, 54)

When boreholes malfunctioned and broke down, women utilized the LEAP funding to help fix them. In the UWR, households frequently contribute to the community's requests for water infrastructure repairs as part of the ongoing maintenance of the community's water infrastructure. Their readiness to allocate a portion of the LEAP cash transfers to help with these repairs highlights community agency and group efforts to reduce water disruption. This is crucial, as such disruptions force women and girls to travel farther to get water in their communities.

"There are occasions when we are asked to contribute GHC 2.00 or GHC 5.00 for repairs. I cover these costs using the LEAP money that I receive." (Memuna, 54)

LEAP and Coping with Water Security

Diversification of the cash grants into other household expenditures (i.e., health and education) necessitates the adoption of coping strategies to stay water secure. One common coping strategy is borrowing money from friends or relatives to fetch water from standpipes. These findings corroborate findings by Collins et al. (2019), who reported that women leverage their social networks of families and friends to manage water insecurity.

"To get water, some of us as LEAP beneficiaries actually have to borrow money from our friends or relatives who are non-beneficiaries to fetch the water. When you get it, you pay it back. If you don't get a loan from our family and friends, it means that you cannot get the water to buy." (Lucy, 54)

Household-to-household water borrowing is a common practice in developing countries. Beneficiaries adopted this practice to temporarily sustain their households for a short time. But this practice can expose beneficiaries to stigma and judgement. They may be perceived as receiving cash and still not being able to access a life essential like water.

"When the LEAP cash is not paid, I go to my friends' houses to collect water to cook because otherwise, I will not be able to eat for a whole day. They make fun of me sometimes because I am collecting free money, but I am still borrowing money to fetch water." (Suzzie, 53)

In some cases, beneficiary households cope with water insecurity by fetching safe water on loan at standpipes. The standpipes, which are mostly private, are managed by Caregivers who oversee daily operations, regulate access, collect user fees, and maintain records. They allow some clients to fetch water on loan and pay later when they have money. However, they are allowed only a limited number of basins to ensure income generation for covering utility costs, such as electricity required for standpipe operations. As a result, this often leads to insufficient water for daily needs.

"On days that we don't have money to fetch water, I have to go and talk to the caretaker about it, and my children would fetch it, and I will pay later. But if you are fetching on loan, he only allows the children to fetch the water once. Which is a single basin of water." (Fatima, 50)

Policy Insights

Integrate Water into the LEAP program: The synergy between cash transfer and water security highlights the need to include water in the complementary services provided by LEAP.

Create a Strategic Partnership for Water Provision: The LEAP secretariat should collaborate with NGOs and relevant organizations to expand the provision of water into rural areas. This will improve water accessibility to the beneficiaries and extend these benefits to the surrounding communities, helping to reduce poverty and vulnerability more broadly.

Introducing Targeted Water Subsidies for Social Protection Beneficiary Households: To reduce financial constraints on water access, targeted water subsidies should be introduced for LEAP beneficiary households. This would ensure affordability while supporting livelihood and well-being outcomes.

References

- Anderson, D. M., Fisher, M. B., Kwena, O., Kambou, H., Broseus, R., Williams, A. R., Liang, K., Ramaswamy, R., & Bartram, J. (2021). Adapting a safe water storage container to improve household stored water quality in rural burkina faso: A cluster randomized trial. Journal of Water Sanitation and Hygiene for Development, 11(5), 719–731. https://doi.org/10.2166/washdev.2021.065
- Collins, S. M., Mbullo Owuor, P., Miller, J. D., Boateng, G. O., Wekesa, P., Onono, M., & Young, S. L. (2019). 'I know how stressful it is to lack water!' Exploring the lived experiences of household water insecurity among pregnant and postpartum women in western Kenya. Global Public Health, 14(5), 649–662. https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2018.1521861
- Renzaho, A., Chitekwe, S., Chen, W., Rijal, S., Dhakal, T., Chikazaza, I. R., & Dahal, P. (2018). Impact of a multidimensional child cash grant programme on water, sanitation and hygiene in Nepal. Journal of Water Sanitation and Hygiene for Development, 8(3), 520–532. https://doi.org/10.2166/washdev.2018.006
- Samson, M., Lee, U., Ndlebe, A., Quene, M. K., Niekerk, V. I., Gandhi, V., Harigaya, T., & Abrahams, C. (2004). The Social and Economic Impact of South Africa's Social Security System Board of Directors. www.epri.org.za
- United Nations Children's Fund. (2021). Reimagining WASH Water Security for All. https://www.unicef.org/media/95241/file/water-security-for-all.pdf

Author:

This policy briefing was prepared by research assistant Mildred Naamwintome Molle, under the guidance of Dr. Elijah Bisung (PI).

For more information about research, contact:

- Mildred Naamwintome Molle
- Elijah Bisung, Ph.D: elijah.bisung@queensu.ca

Funder:

New Frontiers in Research Fund
Fonds Nouvelles frontières en recherche

Partners

Queen's University

LEAP — Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty Programme

CONIWAS — Ghana Coalition of NGOs in the Water and Sanitation Sector

For more information:

Address: School of Kinesiology and Health Studies, 28 Division Street, Queen's University, Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

Visit our website: www.ghecollab.ca

Email: collab@queensu.ca

For more project background information, publications, visit www.washequity.org/policy-briefs