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Policy Analysis: National Solidarity Programme (NSP)

I. Introduction

National Solidarity Programme (NSP), a large government development intervention in Afghanistan, captivated the international community because of claims of initiating progressive change for women in Afghanistan and doubling as a form of counterinsurgency. Through a unique randomized program implementation, researchers investigated the empirical validity of these claims. While NSP’s effects may not have been as pronounced or universal as development organizations would hope, the meaningful and significant impacts for women, infrastructure access, and counterinsurgency support the development program’s merit as model for future application in similar contexts.

II. What is NSP

The National Solidarity Programme (NSP), Afghanistan’s largest development program, is a community development program implemented exclusively by the Afghan government’s Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development shortly after the Taliban was ousted in 2001 (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013). The program has a wide reach affecting 30,000 villages in 361 of Afghanistan’s 398 districts and has prompted the implementation of 64,000 local development projects (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013, 2015). The World Bank and a range of bilateral aid agencies fund the program, and 8 national and 21 international NGOs are involved in program facilitation, but survey data confirms that program recipients overwhelmingly perceive the program as government funded (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013, 2015). The program is implemented at the village level and involves two main interventions; first, NSP mandates the creation of a Community Development Council (CDC) composed of an equal number of men and women elected through an universal suffrage secret ballot election, and second, CDCs receive a grant from NSP of $200 per household up to $60,000 per village to implement development projects decided upon by the CDC in consultation with the village (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013). As a grant requirement, one of these projects must be explicitly directed at women in the village. While NSP’s original goals were to create local governance institutions and deliver services to villages, a project too burdensome for the relatively weak central government, the program “explicitly mentions promoting gender equality as one of the program’s main goals” (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013, 543).

This project evaluation focuses on the second phase of NSP, implemented from 2007 to 2011. In the second phase, NSP was implemented in areas not covered in the first phase (2003-2006). In implementing the second phase, the Afghan government decided it wanted a rigorous impact evaluation of the project, but as a result of financial constraints, the government could only implement the second phase in 250 of the intended 500 villages; the government decided to randomly select 250 of the villages to receive the program immediately and left the other 250 as a control group that would receive the program later, in 2012. Using this unique situation in which a development project is implemented through randomization, World Bank economist Andrew Beath conducted a series of empirical studies with a team of researchers to evaluate this phase of NSP’s effects on women’s empowerment (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013), insurgencies (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2017), and broader quality of life in Afghanistan (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2015).

III. Did NSP Empower Women?

To determine whether NSP improved structural conditions for women in Afghanistan, a brief description of common living conditions for women in rural Afghanistan is necessary. Afghan women face a myriad of barriers to full participation in social, economic and political life. Unmarried women cannot socialize with unmarried men because of tribal codes; *Gheirat* refers to the widespread idea that women must stay within the house to preserve their honor while *Purdah* refers to a principle that women should be hidden from public view (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013). The local political structures, participatory councils called *Jirga* or *Shura*, responsible for managing public goods and dispute adjudication are strictly male (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013). Women’s primary role is to take care of their children and families and cultivate small plots of land; male heads of household exercise control over women almost as objects, as is evidenced by the practice of bride price where a groom’s family pays the father of the bride and the practice of women being *given* in marriage to settle debts (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013). Women’s mobility is limited by requirements that they have a

Within this conservative context, Beath et al.’s statistical analyses revealed NSP resulted in more active participation by women in the community including in local governance through CDCs. NSP also had a durable positive effect on women partaking in income generating activities (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013). Despite these improvements, NSP had little effect on women’s broader situation within household and society, as they did not see an increase in power over family decision-making or a change in societal attitudes about girl’s education or whether women can work for the government (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013). The authors of this research present two explanations for why broader norms remained unchanged: first, the cultural context may have constrained any possible impact of the project, or second, their measurement only two years into the program may have been to early to pick up on the project’s potential to effectuate deep social change (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013).

While “women’s empowerment” has become something of a vacuous buzzword within development discourse (Rowlands 1998), Beath’s empirical research presents evidence that NSP had durable positive impacts improving women’s lives in some arenas while failing to effectuate lasting change in others. Regardless of scholarly disagreement on whether this constitutes “empowerment,” since these effects are sizable and meaningful for women in Afghanistan, NSP’s model of development merits consideration as a model for future development projects.

IV. Developmental Effects: Infrastructure and Counter-insurgency

Beyond a moderate yet positive impact on challenging gender inequality, NSP resulted in improvements in infrastructure and challenges to ongoing insurgencies within Afghanistan.

In contrast to effects on “empowerment,” evaluating NSP’s impact on infrastructure was simple. Beath et al. place the projects funded by NSP grants into six main categories: transportation, water or sanitation, power, irrigation, literacy or vocational training, and “other” referring largely to construction of schools or community centers (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2015). NSP greatly improved access to water and electricity, as a large portion of the projects chosen by CDCs were in these categories (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2015).

In 2006, shortly before the beginning of the second phase of NSP, the Taliban insurgency escalated; within this context of civil conflict, a variety of international actors, including the U.S. military, began to see NSP as a form of counterinsurgency (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2017). Evaluating NSP’s impact a form of counterinsurgency poses greater difficulties because of the complexity and unpredictability of insurgent violence and its geographic variation, but if NSP has a positive impact in this arena, the project model holds even greater importance for future development interventions.

In a similar form of statistical analyses to the empowerment study—this time with a data set measuring security incidents—researchers found NSP reduced security incidents near villages that received the program (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2017). This impact was not short lived, as the reduction continued four years after the start of the program. Yet this impact was also not universal, as in areas near the Afghan border with Pakistan, NSP made attacks *more likely*. The probable explanation for this variable effect is that due to NSP’s improvement of economic welfare and public attitudes towards all level of government, it reduced support for local insurgents; in the case of the border with Pakistan, the same effect was not observable because violence came from foreign insurgents unaffected by local support, who may even have been seen development projects as targets to attack (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2017). The broader implication of this research is that development projects can help mitigate local insurgencies, but may also exacerbate insurgent violence when the insurgency doesn’t arise from the local population (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2017). One final caveat should be made to this broad effect, as earlier research found that NSP only improved perceptions of the government around the period of the delivery of resources to the community, which under NSP only happened during the singular period of project implementation in each community (Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2015).

V. Conclusion

NSP was an imperfect yet productive community development program that moved Afghanistan in the direction of gender equality by integrating women within local governance institutions but failed in the short-term to challenge broader patriarchal norms; beyond its gender component, NSP improved rural access to water and electricity and reduced the risk of insurgent violence in nearly all the villages it was implemented in within Afghanistan. This broad and rather profound impact merits consideration

In lieu of proposing wholly alternative development interventions for Afghanistan, the research that underpins this analysis suggests narrow tweaks that may improve NSP and future similar development interventions. In understanding an intervention’s effects on empowerment, Beath et al. counsel that program sponsors should be patient and wait many years to see if a large development project has made a dent in deeply ingrained cultural norms. If the development project is intended to function as a form of counterinsurgency, the organization implementing the project should be cautious and attempt to discern whether the insurgency problem they face can be challenged by reducing local support for the insurgents; in other words, is the violence coming from local or foreign insurgents. Finally, in understanding the counterinsurgency effects of NSP, one should note that the improved perception of the government correlated with resource influx from NSP grants, suggesting that for the project to function as a sustained form of counterinsurgency, the development project must produce a *continuous* flow of resources into communities (as opposed to the one-time grant of NSP).

With these modifications to NSP or a future similar development program, future gender equitable community development projects may help to quell insurgent violence while enabling women to take positions of power in local governance institutions — two radical and profoundly important changes in culturally conservative countries like Afghanistan.

Works Cited

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