RANDOMIZED IMPACT EVALUATION OF AFGHANISTAN'S NATIONAL SOLIDARITY PROGRAMME (NSP)

SUMMARY OF EVALUATION METHODOLOGY AND ACTIVITIES

July 31, 2008

I. Introduction

The randomized impact evaluation of the Phase-II of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP-II) is a multi-year study designed to quantify changes - across a broad range of indicators and throughout the life-cycle of program implementation - in 250 'treatment villages' mobilized by NSP and to compare these changes to those observed in 250 'control villages' not participating in NSP. In so doing, the evaluation will provide a rigorous and disaggregated assessment of the impacts of NSP on economic outcomes and the structure of governance and institutions at different stages of program implementation. It is hoped that this information will be of use to the Government of Afghanistan, donors, and to civil society in providing an evidence basis for future decisions concerning NSP.

II. Evaluation Team

The core evaluation team is comprised of Dr. Fotini Christia, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.);[1] Dr. Ruben Enikolpov, Assistant Professor of Economics at the New Economic School in Moscow;[2] and Andrew Beath, Ph.D. Candidate in Government at Harvard University.[3] The core team is advised by leading academics and professionals experienced in evaluation and survey research, including Amanullah Assil, Senior Advisor to the Government of Afghanistan's National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA); Dr. Robert Bates, Professor of Government at Harvard University; Dr. Rachel Glennerster, Executive Director of the MIT Poverty Action Lab; Dr. Benjamin Olken, Associate Professor of Economics at M.I.T.; and Dr. James A. Robinson, Professor of Government at Harvard University.[4]

III. Design

The evaluation methodology and instruments were developed under the supervision of the advisory team and following consultations with donor representatives, Facilitating Partners (FPs), and NSP senior management. The evaluation structure was designed with the following goals: to accommodate the security and logistical constraints faced by implementing agencies; to build capacity within the Government of Afghanistan with respect to the design and implementation of rigorous impact evaluations; to provide evidence-based recommendations on ways in which the process of NSP implementation might be refined; and to provide estimates of program impact that are statistically unbiased, computationally transparent, and easily replicable by external researchers.

In reflection of the dual function of NSP to both build representative structures of governance and improve access to services and increase economic activity, the evaluation is structured to address

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[1] cfotini@mit.edu
[2] renikolop@nes.ru
[3] beath@fas.harvard.edu

[4] Per mandatory procedures for human subjects research conducted by affiliates at Harvard University, the methodology and instruments of the evaluation were reviewed by Harvard University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in April 2007 and April 2008 and approved without reservation.

questions related both to economic outcomes and to institutions and governance. Questions pertaining to economic outcomes include: (i) What is the impact of NSP on access to essential services and infrastructure?; (ii) What is the impact of NSP on the average and variation in the level of consumption and assets?; (iii) What is the impact of NSP on the level and diversification of village-level production, agriculture, and other economic activities?; and (iv) What is the impact of NSP on the incidence and function of borrowing. Questions pertaining to institutions and governance include: (i) What is the impact of NSP on structures and perceptions of local governance?; (ii) What is the impact of NSP on the participation of women on governance?; and (iii) What is the impact of NSP on interpersonal trust and political participation? It is expected that further questions of interest may be added to reflect the specific interests of stakeholders and a consultation process to facilitate this is planned for late summer 2008.

IV. Methodology

The methodology of the evaluation is structured around a comparison, over a two- to three-year period, of changes in outcomes of interest between 250 'treatment villages' and 250 'control villages'. The 500 treatment and control villages are located within 10 districts in Balkh, Baghlan, Daykundi, Ghor, Herat, and Nangarhar provinces. The 10 districts were selected based on size, security conditions, the consent of the assigned FP, and the constraint that no villages in the district had previously received NSP activities. The 10 districts provide what is considered to be a representative sample of Afghanistan's geographic, ethnic, and economic diversity.[5]

Within each of the 10 evaluation districts, 50 'evaluation villages' were selected by the assigned FP, with the understanding that 25 of the 50 villages would be randomly selected for participation in NSP and that the remaining 25 villages would form the control group and not receive NSP until following the completion of the evaluation. Within each evaluation district, the evaluation team used existing data to form 25 'matched village pairs', grouping villages with similar pre-treatment characteristics. A computer algorithm was then used to randomly select one of each matched village pair to receive NSP.

Estimates of the impact of NSP will be based upon a comparison of changes in outcomes of interest from the baseline and the follow-up surveys between the treatment and control groups.[6] As the 500 villages in the evaluation sample were randomly assigned to either the treatment or control groups, the pre-NSP characteristics of villages selected to receive NSP are, on average, identical to outcomes of interest in those villages not selected to not receive NSP. Accordingly, should any differences in the average level of outcomes of interest arise between the 250 treatment villages and the 250 control villages, it can be assured that those differences reflect the impact of NSP and not any differences in starting conditions between the treatment and control villages.

V. Baseline Survey

During August and September of 2007, the baseline survey was administered in the 500 treatment and control villages. In each village, 10 randomly-selected male heads-of-households were surveyed, a focus group questionnaire was administered to leaders of the village and/or members of the village *shura*, a focus group questionnaire was administered to females from the leading families of the

[5] A full accounting of the procedure for selecting the 10 evaluation districts and 500 evaluation villages is provided in Section IV.I of the "Methodology and Hypotheses" paper, available on request from the evaluation team.

[6] These are known as "difference-in-difference" estimates, as they compare the difference of differences over time within the treatment group with differences over time within the control group.

village, and each of the female focus group participants were interviewed individually. In total, nearly 13,000 people were interviewed during the baseline survey. Although the baseline survey is, by definition, unable to provide information concerning the impact of NSP, a number of interesting findings were obtained from the survey and these are described below.

In order to inform whether sub-projects implemented by NSP are reflective of the preferences of villagers, the baseline survey sought to obtain detailed information concerning which types of sub-projects respondents felt were most needed by the village. The results indicate that male heads-of-household and female respondents believe that clean drinking water facilities are of primary importance,[7] followed by schools,[8] and health facilities.[9] Projects focused on irrigation and roads and bridges were of high importance to male respondents, both at the household and focus group level, but were of lesser importance to female respondents.[10] Interestingly, only 10 percent of male focus group respondents, 6 percent of male household respondents, and 7 percent of female respondents considered electricity to be the highest priority project. Other projects, such as training courses, provision of agricultural seeds, machinery, or livestock, were rarely cited as priorities by respondents.

Data from the baseline survey indicates that villagers in the evaluation districts face acute levels of poverty. The average household income for the sample is estimated to be $139 per month, varying from $81 per month in Adraskan in Herat to $233 in Sherzad in Nangarhar. To supplement income, 48 percent of respondents reported borrowing money from sources outside the household. The mean value of loans was $779, although again there was wide variance at the district level, from $282 in Daulina in Ghor to $1,487 in Hisarak in Nangarhar. 45 percent of respondents indicate that the primary purpose of the loan was to purchase food, while 29 percent indicated that the money had been used to payment for medical treatment or purchase medicine. As such, it appears that loans are generally taken smooth consumption following economic shocks, rather than for investment.

Respondents in the evaluation districts face limited access to services. Over 80 percent of households reported drawing water from unsafe water sources, such as unprotected springs, shallow open wells, or reservoirs. Only 14 percent of households reported having access to electricity, although there is significant variation in access between districts - in Balkh and Khost Wa Firing in Baghlan, approximately 35 percent of households had access to electricity, compared to only 2 percent in the districts of Adraskan and Gulran in Herat and Daulina in Ghor. Access to health care was also found to be limited, with around 89 percent of respondents reporting that there was no community health worker available to treat illnesses of people in the village. Only a third of villages had some kind of mixed school, while 22 percent had a boys-only school and 14 percent had a girls-only school. Respondents did indicate that the access of children to education does seem to be improving, however, with 69 percent of male heads-of-household reporting that the number of children from the village that attend school had increased relative to the previous year.

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[7] 30 percent of male heads-of-households and 40 percent of female respondents cited drinking water as their first priority for a village project

[8] 16 percent of male heads-of-households and 15 percent of female respondents cited schools as their first priority

[9] 14 percent of male heads-of-households and 16 percent of female respondents cited health facilities as their first priority

[10] Irrigation projects were cited by 16 percent of male focus group respondents and 14 percent of male heads-of-household respondents as the first priority, but only 3 percent of female respondents cited it as the first priority. Road and bridge projects were cited by 12 percent of male focus group respondents and 14 percent of male household respondents as the first priority, but only 6 percent of female respondents cited it as the first priority.

Prior to the initiation of NSP, villages in the evaluation sample seemed to be poorly served by other projects, with only 4 percent of villages having a development project in operation. Interestingly, approximately half of the respondents were aware of the NSP program, even though no NSP activities had yet been commenced in the evaluation districts. There was significant variance between districts, however. In Sherzad in Nangarhar, over 80 percent of respondents claimed to have heard of NSP, while in the remote districts of Gulran in Herat and Sang Takht in Daykundi, less than 20 percent had heard of NSP.

Results from the baseline survey indicate that women have a limited role in village governance, but that this does not generally reflect the preferences of villagers. Although 71 percent of female respondents stated that they were generally happy with the work of the local *shura* or village leaders, 89 percent responded that the *shura* or village leaders had done nothing for women within the past year and 91 percent responded that there was no formal role by which women could participate in the village *shura*. When female interviewees were asked if they believed women should be allowed to be participate in the *shura*, 70 percent of women interviewed stated that they believed that women should be granted membership and 86 percent stated the believed women should have a separate female *shura*. When male head-of-household interviewees were asked the same questions, only 43 percent stated that they believed women should be allowed to fully participate, but 85 percent expressed support for a separate female *shura*.

Respondents generally indicated a strong desire for political participation and government involvement. Nine out of ten male household respondents indicated a desire to vote in the next presidential and parliamentary elections and approximately 50 percent knew the name of a *Wolesi Jirga* representative for their province. When asked to which entity people earning income should pay tax, over 86 percent respondents reported that tax should be paid to the central government or a representative thereof. Relatively low numbers of respondents reported that tax should be paid to local, district, or provincial entities.

VI. Monitoring of CDC Elections

To provide an independent accounting of the integrity of CDC elections in the 10 evaluation districts, the evaluation team hired and trained election monitors to observe CDC elections in 131 evaluation villages. In each village, monitors were requested to conduct 15 'post-vote' interviews of villages immediately after they voted, complete reports on the characteristics of polling stations and the integrity of voting procedures, and to complete an overall election report to record their impressions of the integrity of the election process in the village. Although FPs knew their work would be subjected to monitoring, they were not aware when that would happen as the monitoring schedule was only known by the evaluation team and the monitor.

Results from the election monitoring suggest that FPs generally exhibited a high degree of professionalism in organizing CDC elections, with no reported incidents of negligence or fraud. Polling booths in the monitored villages were predominantly located in a closed room and in 87 percent of cases afforded privacy for voters. Monitors reported no instances in which ballot papers or boxes may have been changed before the counting of the votes and, in 99 percent of monitored polling stations, there was nobody at the polling station telling people who to vote for or otherwise interfering with the process. The CDC election process generally resulted in an equal number of men and women being elected, as prescribed by the NSP Operational Manual. Of the 131 villages monitored, there were 12 instances where the village had more male than female CDC members and 3 instances where there were more female than male CDC members.

Results from post-vote interviews suggest that villagers exhibit a high level of confidence in the CDC election process. Voters appear to believe that the election process is free and fair, with 97 percent of respondents indicating that CDC members were selected based on vote counts or were chosen by villagers. Some 94 percent of respondents reported that they believed the secrecy of the vote was upheld and 97 percent of respondents reported that they made their own decision for whom to vote. When asked about the primary considerations that informed their vote, respondents reported that candidates' honesty and religious piety ranked the highest among their priorities, followed by considerations for the candidate's education and his commitment to the community.

When asked about who organized the CDC election, 90 percent of respondents mentioned the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD), the NSP program and/or NGO, and 73 percent mentioned MRRD and/or NSP. MRRD was the most frequently cited individual responses, accounting for 46 percent of the total, closely followed by the NSP program. An FP or NGO was cited by approximately 37 percent of people interviewed, with the Government of Afghanistan or Hamid Karzai mentioned by 28 percent of respondents. Voters were asked also about the function of the CDC. 77 percent of respondents answered that the purpose of the CDC is to "help villagers", or words to that effect. 52 percent of respondents mentioned that the purpose of the CDC is to undertake development projects, while 21 percent answered that they believed that the CDC would function to resolve disputes between villagers. When asked whether they believed the CDC was a part of the Government of Afghanistan, 92 percent of respondents responded in the affirmative.

VII. Timeline

As of July 2008, CDC elections and sub-project selection procedures have been completed in the 10 evaluation districts. The evaluation team plans to undertake project implementation monitoring during the fall of 2008, with the first follow-up survey occurring between October 2008 and March 2009, with a second follow-up survey to be conducted in the fall of 2009. The evaluation team hopes to have interim, restricted-sample estimates of one-year NSP and STI impact available by December 2008, with estimates of two-year NSP and STI impact available by November 2009.

VIII. Partnerships

Data collection and processing for the baseline survey and election and project selection monitoring exercises has been contracted to the Vulnerability Analysis Unit (VAU), an government survey unit responsible for administration of the biannual National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA), Afghanistan's only major nationwide household survey. The unparalleled experience and reputation of NRVA survey managers have ensured the integrity and high standard of the various data collection exercises.

VAU has received $535,000 in capacity building funding from the Trust Fund for Statistical Capacity Building (TFSCB) and Institutional Development Facility (IDF) of the World Bank to expand and rationalize their capacity for survey and evaluation design and implementation prior to the first follow-up survey of the NSP evaluation. It is intended that VAU's participation in the NSP evaluation, and a related evaluation of the National Emergency Rural Access Project (NERAP), will build capacities necessary to allow VAU to design and implement rigorous evaluations of development programs for the Government of Afghanistan and the donor community.

To ensure transparency and to facilitate independent verification of the methodology and findings of the NSP impact evaluation, a website has been created to disseminate materials, data, and other information concerning the evaluation. The URL is: http://web.mit.edu/cfotini/www/NSP-IE. It is the intention of the evaluation team to publish on the website all the raw data collected during the evaluation, as well as all the computer code used to estimate impacts. Given that randomized evaluations allow estimates of program impacts can be calculated in a relatively straight-forward manner, it is the hope of the evaluation team that the publication of the data and code on the website will enable external researchers and stakeholders to replicate the analysis and ensure that impacts have been determined in an appropriate manner.