



Policy Brief #3: Democratic Governance in Afghanistan

Study: Do Elected Councils Improve Governance? Experimental Evidence on Local Institutions in Afghanistan

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Andrew Beath, Fotini Christia, and Ruben Enikolopov set out to determine how local institutions affect the quality of democratic governance in 500 villages throughout Afghanistan. They find mixed results: the creation of local committee structures is not sufficient to ensure better outcomes and in some conditions may produce worse outcomes, however the best outcomes arise when elected committees are created and also mandated to make distributive decisions.

Research Question The government of Afghanistan has been implementing a large scale community driven reconstruction program aimed, in their words, to build, strengthen and maintain Community Development Councils (CDCs) as effective institutions for local governance and socio-economic development.

Using a randomized trial, the research team sought to assess whether the interventions (a) improve the targeting of aid distribution; (b) improve targeting as assessed subjectively by villagers (c) reduce embezzlement by leadership; and (d) creates more integrated decision-making process among villagers.

Research Design An experimental design was used in which the NSP program was partially extended to ten non-NSP districts in 2007; in each of these, 50 villages were selected and then randomly assigned to take part in NSP or not. Selected villages were grouped into matched pairs based on background characteristics and a requirement

that they not be within 1km of each other; one unit in each pair was then randomly assigned to treatment.

To measure effects, Beath et al implemented a wheat distribution program in 500 villages that did and did not take part in the NSP program. The distribution was set up differently in different areas in order to work out the conditions under which program effects operate. In NSP treatment villages, the researchers randomly varied whether the elected councils were appointed to manage the distribution, or whether this was left to traditional village leaders. In NSP control villages, they varied whether distribution would be run through the traditional leadership or whether the inclusion of women in decision making was expressly required.

Data was gathered ten days after the delivery of the aid with household surveys on process and allocations administered to a random sample of households, a random sample of those listed as recipients, and a random sample of households that had received wheat based on peers reports but had not been reported by the village leaders.

Findings & Implications Beath et al find that targeting in distribution is better managed by elected councils rather than de facto leaders within the village. They did not find any significant effects of the interventions on subjective targeting, embezzlement or nepotism within the villages. Surprisingly however they find that outcomes are worse in areas in which the NSP created committees but these committees were not subsequently appointed to manage the wheat distribution. Outcomes were also worse in those areas that mandated women's participation.

As Beath et al report, the biggest contribution of the study is to show how having an elected councils is not sufficient to ensure effective distribution, rather, specifically mandating these councils appears critical.