

Randomized Impact Evaluation of Afghanistan's National Solidarity Programme

Executive Summary of the Final Report¹

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Introduction

The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) is the largest development program in Afghanistan. Since its inauguration in 2003, NSP has established 32,000 Community Development Councils (CDCs) across 361 districts in all of Afghanistan's 34 provinces and has financed nearly 65,000 development projects.

NSP seeks to improve the access of rural villagers to basic services and to create a foundation of village governance based on democratic processes and female participation. The program is structured around two major village-level interventions: (1) the creation of a gender-balanced CDC through a secret-ballot, universal suffrage election; and (2) the disbursement of block grants, valued at \$200 per household up to a community maximum of \$60,000, to fund village-level projects selected, designed, and managed by the CDC in consultation with villagers.

The NSP impact evaluation (NSP-IE) is a multi-year randomized control trial designed to measure the effects of implementation of the second phase of NSP on a broad range of economic, political, and social indicators. While there have been a number of qualitative studies of NSP, the NSP-IE is the first large-sample quantitative assessment capable of providing rigorous estimates of program impact.

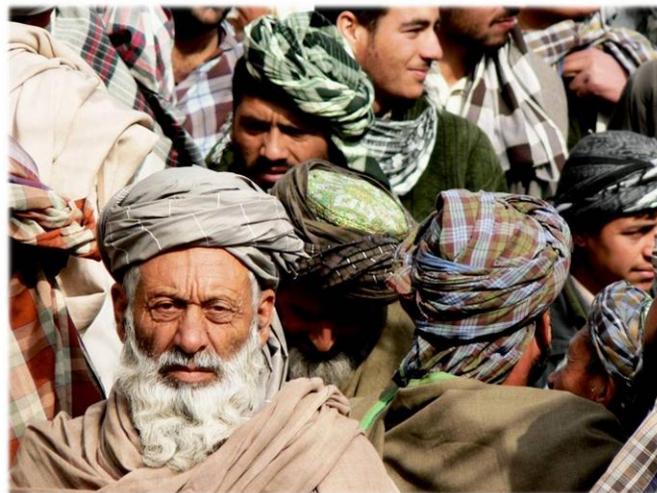
Methodology and Data Sources

The sample for study consists of 500 villages selected jointly with NSP and implementing partners in mid-2007. The 500 villages are spread equally across 10 districts in Balkh, Baghlan, Daykundi, Ghor, Herat, and Nangarhar provinces. Using a matched-pair cluster randomization procedure, the evaluation team randomly selected 250 of the 500 villages to receive NSP and comprise the treatment group for the study, with the remaining villages assigned to the control group. The design of NSP-IE facilitates a transparent and unbiased estimation of program impacts by ensuring that the background characteristics of the treatment group are, on average, identical to the control group. Accordingly, any differences that arise between the two groups of villages are generally attributable to NSP.

Baseline, midline, and endline surveys administered between August 2007 and October 2011 provide data for the study. Collectively, the surveys comprised over 25,000 household interviews with male and female villagers, as well as more than 2,600 focus groups with male village leaders and women. Data from the midline survey is used to estimate impacts of NSP two years after the start of NSP implementation and after all treatment villages had elected CDCs and selected projects, but prior to the completion of 82 percent of NSP-funded projects. Data from the endline survey is used to estimate impacts four years after implementation and after 99 percent of NSP-funded projects had been completed, but prior to the mobilization of control villages by NSP. The study also draws on the findings of a village benefit distribution analysis (VBDA), which assessed program impacts on the equity of food aid distributions by village leaders.²

Treatment villages in the sample commenced NSP implementation following the baseline survey in late 2007, with almost all treatment villages completing the program in 2011. Although the third phase of NSP proposes to provide follow-up block grants to villages, the 250 treatment villages have received only one phase of the program to-date.

Figure 1: CDC Election in Balkh



¹ The Final Report is available at: <http://www.nsp-ie.org>

² The results of the VBDA are presented in [Beath, Christia & Enikolopov \(2013\)](#)

Summary of Findings

The study tests a series of hypotheses which examine the impacts at midline and endline of NSP on the access of villagers to utilities, services and infrastructure; on the economic welfare of villagers; on local governance; on political attitudes and state-building; and on social norms. The results of these hypotheses tests are summarized in Table 1.

Access to Utilities, Services and Infrastructure

NSP improves the access of villagers to basic utilities. NSP-funded drinking water projects increase access to clean drinking water, with the program resulting in a higher usage of protected sources at endline. NSP also reduces the time that households spend collecting water, but has no lasting impact on perceived water quality or on the incidence of water shortages. NSP-funded electricity projects substantially boost electricity usage, which rises by a quarter on account of the program.

NSP also increases access to education, health care, and counseling services for women. As NSP does not usually fund such services, these impacts arise indirectly from other changes induced by NSP. NSP increases girls' school attendance and their quality of learning, but there is no impact on boys' school attendance. NSP also increases child doctor and prenatal visits and the probability that an illness or injury is attended to by a medical professional, although does not affect other health outcomes. Finally, NSP raises the proportion of women who have a group or person with whom they can discuss their problems.

NSP-funded village-level irrigation and transportation projects are less successful. Irrigation projects have no noticeable impact on the ability of land-holding villagers generally to access sufficient irrigation. Although there is weak evidence that local transportation projects increase village accessibility at midline, this impact does not persist and there is no evidence that such projects impact village-to-district transportation times or the frequency by which male villagers visit the district center.

There is weak evidence that, once complete, NSP-funded projects fulfill the development needs of male villagers, as measured by the types of projects identified as being most needed by the village. NSP particularly reduces demands for drinking water projects, which were identified by a higher proportion of male villagers than any other projects at baseline.

Economic Welfare

NSP impacts the economic perceptions and optimism of villagers, particularly women. Female villagers exhibit improved perceptions of the current economic situation and are more optimistic, both at midline and endline. The economic perceptions and optimism of male villagers improves at midline, but there is only weak evidence of an impact at endline on optimism and no evidence of a longer-term impact on perceptions.

Despite the changes in economic perceptions, few impacts are observed on objective measures of economic activity. At midline, there is weak evidence that NSP induces small increases in the diversity of household income sources and in caloric intake, although there is no conclusive evidence to indicate that these impacts persist beyond project completion. At endline, there is only weak evidence of impact on the amount borrowed by households. NSP has no conclusive impacts at midline or endline on income levels, income regularity, consumption levels, assets, or food insecurity.

There is also no evidence that NSP impacts general production and marketing outcomes. NSP does not affect agricultural yields, productivity, or harvest sales, but induces a fleeting increase at midline in agricultural sales revenue. NSP also does not affect whether households sell animals or animal products or the revenue derived from such. While NSP increases handicraft sales and sales revenue at midline, these impacts are not durable. There is, however, some evidence that NSP reduces out-migration from villages at midline and endline.

The impacts of NSP on economic welfare appear to be driven more by the infusion of block grant resources than by broader impacts of completed projects on economic activity. This underscores the absence of positive effects of infrastructure projects. However, the sustained positive impact on female economic perceptions demonstrates the improvements brought to women's lives by female participation in NSP activities and by NSP-funded projects.

Local Governance

NSP impacts the structure of local governance by substantially increasing the proportion of local assemblies that contain at least one woman member. The creation of CDCs also causes customary leaders to affiliate with

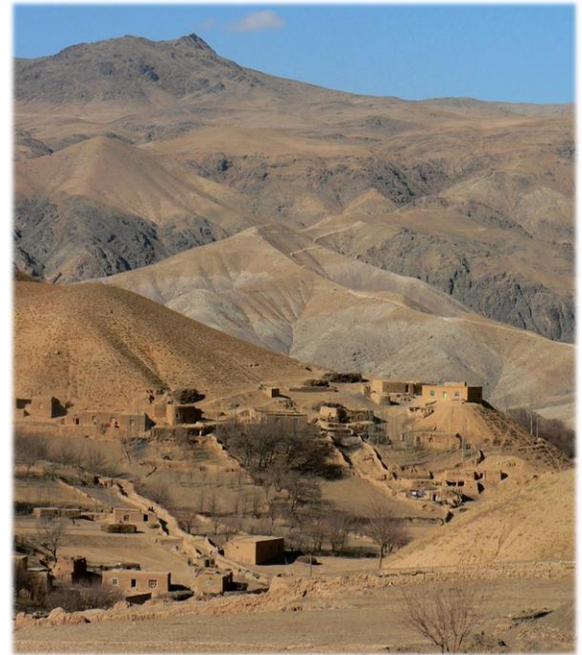
representative assemblies during project implementation, but this is not sustained beyond project completion. There is no evidence that NSP introduces new leaders into the core group of village decision-makers.

The creation of CDCs by NSP induces an increase at midline in the provision of local governance services, the activity level of customary authorities, and the role served by representative assemblies in providing local governance services. However, these impacts generally do not persist following NSP activities. NSP does, though, produce a durable increase in the number of meetings held annually by representative assemblies. There is also strong evidence that NSP increases the provision of local governance services specific to women and that the effect persists to endline.

NSP increases villager participation in local governance at midline, as measured by meeting attendance and a desire to change leader decisions. NSP also increases demands for the involvement of representative assemblies in local governance. However, while the desire to change leader decisions persists, NSP has no durable impact on whether villagers attend assembly meetings or believe assemblies should be involved in local governance.

Endline data indicates that NSP has a negative impact on local governance quality. Specifically, after project completion, male villagers are less likely to be satisfied with the work of local leaders and are more likely to disagree with recent decisions and actions of village leaders. While NSP induces an increase at midline in the extent to which village leaders are perceived as responsive to women's needs, the effect does not persist. Complementary evidence from the VBDA indicates that the observed worsening of governance quality is most likely due to the weakening of local governance accountability structures caused by the creation of CDCs in parallel to existing customary institutions and the lack of a clear delineation of institutional responsibilities following project completion.

Figure 2: Village in Daulina



Political Attitudes and State-Building

There is strong evidence that NSP increased participation in the 2010 parliamentary elections, with the proportion of male and female villagers who claimed to have cast a ballot being 4 and 10 percent higher, respectively, in treatment villages. NSP also raises appreciation of the use of democratic processes in local governance, as manifested by an increase in the proportion of male villagers who prefer that the village headman is subject to secret-ballot election. However, NSP has no effect on female views of democratic elections or participatory decision-making procedures, on whether male villagers believe the President or provincial governor should be elected, on whether male villagers believe it appropriate to publicly discuss governance, or on support for the participatory resolution of major village issues.

Evidence that NSP increases the legitimacy of the central government is relatively weak. NSP has no impact on whether villagers believe that the government should exercise jurisdiction over local crimes, set the school curriculum, issue ID cards, or collect income tax, or whether villagers prefer a centralized state or a weak federation or identify primarily as Afghan. At midline, NSP induces an increase in linkages with government officials and representatives of the Afghan National Security Forces, but these effects are not durable.

There is strong evidence that NSP improves perceptions of government at midline, but only weak evidence of an impact at endline. During project implementation, NSP induces a strongly significant increase in the reported benevolence of a wide-range of government entities, but this impact fades somewhat following project completion, with weak positive impacts observed only for the President and central government officials. This pattern is also true for NGO officials, although NSP has a durable positive impact on perceptions of ISAF soldiers.

NSP does not appear to impact the likelihood of villages suffering violent attacks, at least as reported by villagers at midline and endline. There is also no evidence that NSP affects the ability of insurgent groups to expropriate harvests. However, NSP improves perceptions of the local security situation among both male and female villagers at midline, although only the effects for male villagers persist beyond project completion.

The impacts of NSP on perceptions of government at midline indicate that the program is generally perceived as government-owned and is positively received by villagers. However, the positive impact on perceptions of government is mostly confined to the period of project implementation, with villagers generally reverting to original attitudes vis-à-vis government once project funds are expended. This would seem to imply that government legitimacy is tied more to the regularized provision of public goods and interaction with those delivering services than by improved development outcomes *per se*.

Figure 3: Boys at CDC Election in Daulina



Social Norms

In line with observations that public resource decisions can sometimes aggravate intra-communal divisions, we find weak evidence that, during project implementation, NSP increases the incidence of disputes and feuds, while reducing resolution rates. Once projects are completed, this general effect disappears, however, and there is weak evidence that NSP reduces intra-village disputes. There is also some evidence at midline that NSP increases interpersonal trust among male villagers, although no evidence of an endline impact for male villagers and no evidence of impact at midline or endline for female villagers. Given the small magnitude of the observed changes, there is no overall evidence of a discernible impact of NSP on social cohesion.

During project implementation, NSP improves basic literacy and computational skills of male and female villagers, although these impacts do not last. There is also evidence that NSP reduces the proportion of female villagers who report being unhappy with their lives, a result which could be caused by increased availability of counseling services for women, increased female participation in local governance, and/or increased access to basic utilities and services. NSP, however, does not affect the happiness of male villagers.

NSP increases men's acceptance of female participation in political activity and local governance. Specifically, the program increases men's openness to female electoral participation, national candidacy by women, and women holding positions in the civil service and working with NGOs. NSP also increases acceptance of female membership of village councils and of female participation in the selection of the village headman. The impact on women's views on female participation in political activity and local governance is more marginal. NSP also has limited impacts on cultural constraints to the education of women.

NSP durably impacts the participation of women in local governance. An increase is observed in the participation of women in dispute mediation and aid allocation decisions. Although NSP does not impact female intra-village mobility, female socialization, or female participation in economic activity or household decision-making, it increases the frequency by which women travel beyond their village. At endline, women in NSP villages are more likely to have visited the nearest village in the past year and are more likely to have visited the district center in the past month.

Conclusions

NSP-funded utilities projects deliver substantial increases in access to drinking water and electricity, but infrastructure projects are less effective. As a consequence, NSP has limited impacts on long-term economic outcomes such as consumption or asset ownership.

Project implementation and the accompanying infusion of block grant resources do, though, deliver a short-term economic boost. This stimulus also improves villagers' perceptions of central and sub-national government, as well as of allied actors such as NGOs and ISAF soldiers. However, the impact of NSP on perceptions of government weakens considerably following project completion, which suggests that government legitimacy is dependent on the regular provision of public goods and/or interaction with service providers.

The creation of CDCs by NSP has few durable impacts on the identity or affiliation of *de facto* village leaders, provision of local governance services to male villagers, or the role of representative bodies in local governance. Moreover, NSP worsens perceptions by male villagers of local governance quality at endline. This latter result is apparently caused by the diffusion of institutional accountability due to the parallel co-existence of CDCs with customary authorities and the lack of clarity concerning the role of CDCs following project completion.

The mandating of female participation by NSP – and the consequent female participation in project implementation – results in increased male acceptance of female participation in public life and broad-based improvements in women’s lives, encompassing increases in participation in local governance, access to counseling, and mobility. These and other economic, institutional, and social impacts of NSP further drive increases in girls’ school attendance and in women’s access to medical services, as well as improved economic perceptions and optimism among women in NSP villages.

Table 1: Midline and Endline Impacts Scorecard

Families	Groups	Endline	Midline	Hypotheses	Endline	Midline	
Access to Utilities, Services & Infrastructure	Utilities	✓	***	✓	**	✓	**
		✓	***	✓	**	✓	**
	Services	✓	***	✓	*	✓	***
		✓	***	✓	*	✓	***
		✓	***	✓	*	✓	***
	Infrastructure	•	•	•	•	•	•
		•	•	•	•	•	•
Project Pref.	✓	*	•	•	✓	*	
Economic Activity	Perceptions	✓	***	✓	***	✓	***
	Stocks & Flows	•	•	•	•	•	•
		•	•	•	•	•	•
		•	•	•	•	•	•
		•	•	•	•	•	•
		•	•	•	•	•	•
	Production & Marketing	•	•	•	•	•	•
Migration	•	•	✓	***	✓	**	
Local Governance	Structure	✓	***	✓	***	•	•
		✓	***	✓	***	•	•
		✓	***	✓	***	•	•
	Function	✓	**	✓	***	•	•
		✓	**	✓	***	•	•
		✓	**	✓	***	•	•
	Quality & Participation	•	•	✓	***	•	•
•		•	✓	***	•	•	
•		•	✓	***	•	•	
Political Attitudes & State-Building	Democratic Values	✓	***	✓	***	✓	**
		✓	***	✓	***	✓	**
	State Legitimacy	✓	**	✓	***	✓	**
		✓	**	✓	***	✓	**
	Perceptions of Government	✓	**	✓	***	✓	**
		✓	**	✓	***	✓	**
		✓	**	✓	***	✓	**
Conflict	•	•	✓	*	•	•	
	•	•	✓	*	•	•	
Social Norms	Social Cohesion	•	•	•	•	•	•
		•	•	•	•	•	•
	Basic Skills	•	•	✓	***	•	•
	Happiness	✓	*	•	•	✓	*
	Gender Attitudes	✓	***	✓	***	✓	**
		✓	***	✓	***	✓	**
		✓	***	✓	***	✓	**
✓		***	✓	***	✓	**	
✓		***	✓	***	✓	**	
Gender Outcomes	✓	**	✓	***	•	•	
	✓	**	✓	***	•	•	
	✓	**	✓	***	•	•	

Note: ✓ denotes beneficial impacts; ✗ adverse impacts; • no evidence of impact; and – no data. *** denotes statistical significance at 1 percent level; ** statistical significance at 5 percent level; and * statistical significance at 10 percent level. Grey shading (*) denotes a loss of a level of statistical significance if baseline values are controlled for. Blue and dark red shading (*, ✗) denotes a gain of statistical significance (for beneficial and adverse impacts, respectively) if baseline values are controlled for.