Assessment of Learning Outcomes and Social Effects of Community-Based Education in Afghanistan (ALSE) Funded by USAID

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Why Conduct Research in Conflict-Affected Countries?

• Because many children have abysmal prospects

• Because we spend lots of money on aid and social programs

• Because we think rigorous research can help guide education policy and improve lives
Outline

- Introduction
- Background
- First study: Overview and outcomes
- Current study
- Research Design and Data
- Next steps
Motivation and Overarching Question
(First study funded by: Spencer Foundation, National Science Foundation, USIP, Weikart Family Foundation)

General consensus—more primary education desirable, especially for girls:
• MDG 2: Universal Primary Education by 2015
  – 50+ million primary age children out of school living in conflict affected countries
    (Save the Children 2013)
• MDG 3: Eliminate Gender Disparity by 2015
  – Majority of out of school children girls (UN, 2008)

My first study (with Leigh Linden): How does the availability of community-based schools affect girls’ and boys’ educational enrollment and achievement?

In Afghanistan: no good stats, but approximately:
• 2 million primary school-age children (50-60%) out of school
• Estimated 1.3 million of them girls

Two types of barriers assumed to block access:
• Structural and attitudinal
Background: Afghanistan

• National conditions at the time of first study
  – Most insurgency limited to south and east
  – Educational infrastructure limited country-wide

• Conditions in northwest
  – Low levels of enrollment: Boys 35%, Girls 18% (MRRD, 2007)
  – Relatively stable
    • Lawlessness: Crime, tribal, and inter-village conflicts
    • No acid attacks, no attacks on girls’ schools, etc.

• Educational system receiving international assistance
Background: Community-Based Education

- Community-based education is a common intervention in regions/countries where the state is weak and access to education is limited.

- Communities provide infrastructure and a teacher; **NGOs** provide community-organizing, training, and monitoring; government provides textbooks.
First Study: Research Questions

• Primary Research Questions:
  – What are the causal effects of community-based schools on participation and learning?
  – What are the effects on the gender gaps in participation and knowledge?

• Secondary Questions:
  – What is the net effect of distance overall and by gender?
First Study: Research Design

Mixed method design

- Cluster phased-in randomized trial plus qualitative interviews in two districts in Ghor (all villages received schools in year two)

  - Control conditions: No schools in any of these villages, some children (mostly boys) walking long distances to access schools (we call them traditional schools to distinguish)
  - Randomly assign 13 schools to 31 villages
First Study: Research Design

• Sample:
  – Villages clustered in groups: 2-3 villages each group
  – Originally, 34 villages in 12 groups, lost one group
  – 5 treat groups (13 villages), 6 control/phase-in (18 villages)
  – Approx. 1,200 households; Approx. 1,500 children between the ages of 6 and 11

• Timing:
  – June 2006 pilot (different program and location)
  – May 2007 randomization
  – July 2007 schools start
  – Oct/Nov follow up survey
  – Mar/Apr 2008 spring survey
Data Collection

• Two survey rounds: Fall 2007 and Spring 2008
  – Matched over time: Longitudinal

• Survey structure
  – Education census of villages
  – Child and household demographic information
  – Child enrollment questions
  – Tested children directly: Math and Dari
    • Pulled directly from government curriculum
  – Attitudinal questions for parents as well

• Qualitative data collection (nested analysis):
  – Program documents
  – Qualitative interviews with program staff
  – Semi-structured interviews with village leaders and parents
Results: Enrollment

Did providing access to CBS increase enrollment for boys and girls? YES

Without the intervention, girls’ enrollment rate in school is 18% and boys’ is 35%.

With the intervention:
• Enrollment increased by 42ppt for all children.
• Girls’ enrollment increased by 51ppt for a total enrollment of 69%.
• Boys’ enrollment increased by 34.4ppt for a total enrollment of 69.4%.
Results: Test Scores

Did providing access to CBS improve educational outcomes for boys and girls? YES

- Large effect on test scores in both surveys
  - Overall effect of 0.5 Std Dev
  - Larger effects for math than Dari
Distance

• Program works by reducing distance children have to travel.
  – Average reduction is 2.7 miles
• Distance is EXTREMELY important
  – Enrollment: decreases 16 ppt per mile
  – Test Scores: decreases 0.19 St Dev for each mile

Families are far from schools so some adopt compensating strategies
Figure: Enrollment by Distance and Gender
Background:
Community-Based Education

Burd and Linden (2012; 2013) research shows that CBE in remote rural villages in Afghanistan eliminates gender disparity in enrollment and significantly decreases the achievement gap.
Obstacles to Research

- Time required to build and maintain relationships
- Intensive training for research team
- Explaining and preserving the integrity of the study
- Safety of the researchers
Current Study: Preparation

- Afghan government and donors asked if I would do follow up research (2011/12)

- 4 governments, 2 International NGOs, and one “Global Network University” (Afghanistan, US, Canada, Denmark, CRS, CARE, NYU)

- 1.5 years of discussions and relationship building before project started
Research Design

• The Canadian government is providing funding to support community-based education programs implemented by CARE and CRS explicitly to be randomized and studied by Principal Investigators at NYU;

• USAID is funding our research (impact evaluation) to assess this project.
Research Design
(funded by USAID)

• Original sample included 220 villages: 160 “treatment,” 60 “control”—down to about 186, total; Guarding the phase-in approach—mitigating effects of the delay;
• 157 clusters (1-2 villages per cluster)
• Study to take place in 6 provinces: Herat, Ghor, Bamiyan, Daykundi, Kapisa, Parwan
• Different interventions (or variations) within treatment include:
  (1) testing different approaches to (a) increase girls’ and boys’ access to school, and (b) narrow the achievement gap between them, and
  (2) testing different approaches to sustainability
Problem: Not enough qualified teachers

For teacher recruitment and sustainability, ALSE will experiment with two models:

(1) Recruiting from “within” the community model:
• Model prioritizes community ownership and acceptance, although teachers may not have MoE standard credentials

(2) Recruiting accredited teachers model
• Model seeks to recruit only those teachers who possess credentials, but teachers may need incentives to move and communities may need incentives to accept them
Research Design

Problem: Community commitment to education

For community engagement and boosting commitment to girls’ access and learning, ALSE will experiment with two models:

(1) NGOs standard community sensitization practice (status quo)
• NGOs have established practice aimed at building community awareness and buy-in for educating children, especially girls.

(2) Enhanced community sensitization activities (status quo plus)
• NGOs will use Qur’anic messages to enhance community support for girls’ and boys’ education and small scale adult learning programs (community libraries).
Challenges and Efforts to Mitigate Challenges

Challenges:

• Unpredictable, rapidly changing environment

• Weather conditions

• Deteriorating security
  – Vigilante activity vs. Taliban strategy (wrong place, wrong time)

• Rapid staff turn over at all partner organizations (ministries, funders, NGOs)

• Timely and clear communication with all partners—esp. government representatives in districts
What We’ve Done and Next Steps

• March/April: Needs assessment
• May/June: Delays
• July: NGOs started schools
• August: Survey teams trained; Baseline data collection began
• October/November:
  (1) NYU/project registration completed
  (2) Complete baseline data collection
• November: Start qualitative data collection (PACE-A)
Policy Implications

- Data presented to Afghan Ministry of Education in March 2009; 2012; 2013
  - Shift in strategy from rural central schools to more government support for CBS
  - Funding from bilateral organizations
Relevant Literature (first study)

Two approaches yielding conflicting results:

• Effects of school placement in villages
  – Identified through IV and natural experiments
  – Find large effects on participation

• Elasticity of enrollment in distance
  – Primarily cross-sectional estimates
  – Elasticities are implausibly low
    • Filmer (2007) Niger: 4.8 ppts per mile
    – Lavy (1996) and Handa (2002) are other examples

• Build on larger literature exploring the education production process