

Development Programs and Security in Afghanistan

Ruben Enikolopov, NES
November, 2011

This policy brief summarizes the results of recent research which studies the effect of a development program in Afghanistan on the security situation there. We use a large-scale randomized field experiment to examine the effect of the largest development program in Afghanistan on the economic wellbeing of villagers and their attitudes toward the government and the security situation. We find that implementation of the program leads to significant improvement in villagers' economic wellbeing as well as in their attitudes towards the government. The program also leads to an improved security situation in the long run. However, these positive effects on attitudes and security are not observed in districts with high levels of initial violence.

Development programs have long been used to promote economic and political development. In recent years, however, they have assumed yet another role: they have been used to promote security in countries fighting fierce insurgencies, such as Afghanistan and Iraq. The approach contends that such projects, which are commonly used by the domestic government and allied entities to provide basic services and infrastructure, improve economic outcomes, build support for the government, and ultimately reduce violence as sympathy of the population for the insurgency wanes. The idea of using development projects as a counter-insurgency strategy is becoming more and more influential and now constitutes a major component of the new U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine (U.S. Army/Marine Corps, 2006).

The study tests whether this approach works in the context of the National Solidarity Program (NSP) in Afghanistan. NSP is the largest development program in the country and has already brought almost \$1 billion in aid to more than 26,000 Afghan communities. Under the supervision of the program communities elect a council, which assumes responsibility for implementing infrastructure projects (e.g.

building wells or repairing roads) that are chosen by the villagers and are funded by block grants from the NSP.

To measure the effects of the program, the study uses a field experiment conducted in 500 villages across 10 Afghan districts spanning all parts of the country except for the southern provinces, where security levels were insufficient for the study to be carried out. The experiment divided the villages randomly into two groups of the same size, one of which received the program in autumn 2007, while the other group was to receive the program four years later. Before the start of the program the villages in these two groups were virtually identical, so their comparison over the course of these years shows the effect of the program on the life of village communities.

The study uses the results of the extensive survey conducted in these villages two years after the start of the program as well as military information on security incidents around the villages during this period.

Our findings indicate that NSP has a strong positive effect on people's economic wellbeing and on their attitudes towards the

Afghan government (both at the central and local level). NSP also appears to improve attitudes toward NGOs and, to some extent, coalition forces on the ground. Respondents in NSP villages have significantly more positive attitudes toward government figures at almost all levels, including district and provincial governors, central government officials, the President of Afghanistan, Members of Parliament and government judges. Magnitude of effects varies from between 8 percentage points for Members of Parliament to 4 percentage points for the national police. NSP also has a positive effect on the attitudes of villagers toward NGOs and soldiers of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The results for the summary measure indicate that NSPs improve villagers' attitudes by 13 percent of a standard deviation. However, results for the two eastern districts, which experienced high initial levels of violence, are completely different. There is no positive effect of NSP on attitudes toward any government bodies, ISAF soldiers, or NGOs, and the effect on attitudes towards many figures is, in fact, significantly negative.

The results also indicate that villagers have more positive perceptions about security in NSP villages. There is no evidence, however, that the program affects the number of security incidents around villages recorded by NATO coalition forces (ISAF) in the short run (the first 15 months after the start of the program) or the number of security incidents reported by villagers in the survey. However, NSP does reduce the probability of security incidents in the long-run. The probability that a security incident will occur in one- and ten-kilometer radius around a village is smaller in treatment villages by 2 and 4 percentage points, respectively. For a three-kilometer radius, the probability is lower by 2 percentage points, but not statistically significant. In the two eastern districts, the short-run effect is similar to the average effect, but there are no statistically significant differences between treatment and control villages in long-run effects.

Overall, the empirical evidence suggests that strategies for winning “hearts and minds” through the provision of development projects are working, but only in relatively secure regions. The development program improves the attitudes of the civilian population toward the government and makes them more likely to think that the government is working in their best interest, which in turn makes them less likely to support the insurgents. The fact that we observe the effect on security only in the long run suggests that support for the government reduces violence mainly by reducing the number of people willing to join the insurgents, rather than by increasing the population's willingness to share information with the government. The results also suggest that development programs can prevent the spread of violence in relatively secure regions, but they are not effective in reducing violence in regions that are already experiencing significant security problems.

Overall, the results suggest that the benefits of development programs are not limited to the provision of direct economic and social benefits. They can also contribute to long-term sustained development by preventing the spread of violent internal conflicts, which are the core problem in many developing countries.

Ruben Enikolopov

New Economic School (NES)

REnikolopov@nes.ru

www.nes.ru/en/



Ruben Enikolopov is Nordea Assistant Professor of Finance at the New School of Economics in Moscow. He holds a Ph.D. in Economics from Harvard University.

Enikolopov's research interest includes political economics, applied econometrics, corporate finance, and development economics.