Belief Systems and Poverty Alleviation in the Philippines

Researchers:

Gharad Bryan

James Choi

Dean Karlan

Sector(s): Finance, Health

Fieldwork: Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)

Location: Philippines

Sample: 320 communities (7,999 households)

Target group: Rural population Adults Families and households

Outcome of interest: Citizen satisfaction Earnings and income

Intervention type: Coaching and mentoring Information Psychosocial support

AEA RCT registration number: AEARCTR-0001060

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Research Papers: Randomizing Religion: The Impact of Protestant Evangelism on Economic Outcomes.

Partner organization(s): International Care Ministries

Literature on religion has linked religiosity with a mix of positive and negative psychosocial, economic, and health outcomes. In the Philippines, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to measure the impact of a faith-based program on individuals' economic and subjective wellbeing. Results demonstrated that the program increased religiosity and incomes in the short run, but these effects did not persist. The program had no effect on consumption, food security, total hours worked, and life satisfaction.

Policy issue

Greater religious practice and belief are correlated with good physical and mental health[1], , higher wages[2], , and increased school attendance.[3], However, religiosity has also been linked with negative economic effects.[4], [5] There is a lack of rigorous evidence about the impact of religiosity on these outcomes. Can increasing religiosity through a faith-based program improve participants' economic and subjective wellbeing?

Context of the evaluation

In the Philippines, as of 2013, around one in four people lived on less than US$1.25 a day.[6], International Care Ministries (ICM), an evangelical Protestant Christian anti-poverty organization, has worked to address extreme poverty in the Philippines. At the time of study, ICM conducted a four-month health, livelihoods, and religious values training program called Transform for thousands of low-income families each year.

This study took place among the poorest households in Central Mindanao and Negros islands. The communities included in the study were predominantly Catholic (69 percent) or Protestant (21 percent) and had not been previously contacted by ICM. ICM delivered its programs in communities where people already identified as religious. Among study participants, only two in a hundred people described themselves as "not religious at all."



A woman bows her head in prayer while seated in a pew

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Details of the intervention

Researchers partnered with ICM to evaluate how the religious values component of the Transform program affected the economic and subjective wellbeing of people experiencing poverty in the Philippines.

The full 15-week Transform program included weekly 90-minute sessions between February and May 2015. The program's curriculum was divided into three main portions: Values, Health, and Livelihoods. The Values portion of the curriculum focused on teaching participants about the central tenets of Protestant Christian doctrine, including the goodness of God's creation, humanity's rebellion against God, salvation by grace, and the importance of doing good works out of gratitude to God. The lessons on good works target important noncognitive skills like responsible citizenship, community involvement, conscientiousness, perseverance, and self-esteem. The Health training focused on improving participants' health knowledge and changing their health and hygiene behaviors. ICM staff also distributed nutritional supplements and medical treatments to all participants, while providing follow-up medical care. Finally, the Livelihoods curriculum provided training in small business management skills and agriculture.

To evaluate the effect of the religious component of Transform, researchers randomly assigned 7,999 of the lowest-income households in 320 communities across Central Mindanao and Negros Islands to one of the four groups below.

1. *Values, health, and livelihoods (VHL)*: Households in this group were invited to participate in the full Transform curriculum. ICM employees conducted the health and livelihood sessions and an affiliated pastor led the values lessons. (80 communities)
2. *Health and livelihoods only (HL)*: Households in this group were invited to participate in a version of Transform that did not include the values component. ICM employees conducted the health and livelihood sessions and an ICM community organizer assumed all logistical responsibilities. (80 communities)
3. *Values only (V)*: Households in this group were invited to participate in just the values portion of the Transform program. An affiliated pastor led the lessons, and ICM employees were only present provide nutritional supplements and medical assistance. (80 communities)
4. *Comparison group*: Households in this group did not receive any aspect of the Transform program. (80 communities)

Researchers measured outcomes approximately six months and thirty months after the program ended. Both surveys measured religious, economic, health, and social outcomes, and the thirty-month survey included additional questions related to gambling and consumption. In both periods, respondents received PHP 100 (US$2.50) for participating in the survey.

In addition to receiving ethical review and approvals from an institutional review board, the researchers also committed to publishing the results of their study regardless of whether they were positive, null, mixed, or negative. The total amount of religious outreach conducted by ICM was unaffected by the study, which rendered moot certain ethical concerns. The authors reminded readers that using their results to extrapolate to other settings; to answer questions about Filipino history; or to predict impacts at a larger scale of operations, at longer time horizons, or on economic, social, or psychological variables that they did not measure all require great care.

For more on the researchers' discussion of ethical considerations, see pp. 350-351 of the paper.

Results and policy lessons

The values curriculum was effective at increasing both religiosity and income among participants six months after the program ended. However, thirty months after the program, these impacts had faded.

Religiosity: Six months after the program, Transform participants who received the values training scored between 0.08 to 0.13 standard deviations higher on religiosity measures compared to those who did not receive the values training. This effect faded after thirty months, but there was evidence of a shift in religious affiliation from Catholicism to Protestantism. Recipients of the values curriculum were 3.6 percentage points less likely to identify as Catholic compared to communities that did not receive any Transform training, which were 70 percent Catholic (a 5 percent decrease).

Economic outcomes: At six months, the values training increased income among participants by PHP 388 (US$8.65) a month, a 9.2 percent increase relative to the comparison group's average income of PHP 4,213 (US$93.96). However, there were no measurable impacts on consumption, food security, and time spent working. The researchers suggest that the income increase may have resulted from participants being motivated to work harder, as the program increased self-reported grit, particularly perseverance. Program participants also shifted away from agricultural work to other types of work, which may have had a positive effect on income.

The impacts on economic outcomes did not persist. Thirty months after the program, the participants in the V group no longer had an increase in income relative to those in the comparison group.

Perceived wellbeing: At six months, individuals who received the values training experienced a 0.11 point decrease (on a 10-point scale) in perceived relative economic status compared to those in the comparison group, who rated themselves 3.24 on average (a 3.4 percent decrease). One explanation may be that the values training increased participants' interactions with higher-income individuals and made them aware that others were living with less economic hardship.

However, at thirty months, participants in the V group increased their perceived relative economic status by 0.34 points, a 9.3 percent increase from to the comparison group's 3.7-point average. This mixed result may be due to the increased hope and optimism that values curriculum recipients exhibited more than two years after the program since there was no increase in income nor grit.

This study demonstrated that a faith-based curriculum can change participants' religiosity and increase income in the short run. However, the mixed results on the program's impacts over time suggest that the findings should be interpreted with caution when considering the potential of such programs in increasing noncognitive skills and wellbeing persistently.

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