Strengthening Village Courts in Rural Bangladesh

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Sector(s): Political Economy and Governance

Location: Bangladesh

Sample: 107 administrative areas (at least 3210 households & 428 elected representatives)

Target group: Civil servants Rural population

Outcome of interest: Arrests and convictions Citizen satisfaction Transparency and accountability

Intervention type: Community participation

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Partner organization(s): Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), European Comission

The government of Bangladesh is trying to strengthen local justice systems in rural areas by establishing close-to-home, low-cost village courts that would deal with minor, non-criminal cases. Innovations for Poverty Action is working with researchers to evaluate the impact of a program to improve the village court system on access to and quality of justice for marginalized people, as well as socioeconomic and welfare outcomes.

Policy issue

Like in many other low-income countries, inadequate access to justice is a challenge in Bangladesh. Formal courts often have long waiting times and can be difficult to navigate and expensive to use, especially for low-income rural residents. While informal dispute resolution mechanisms are common, they often lack the power to enforce decisions. Some rural residents perceive these informal systems to be biased or beholden to local power structures, which may discourage marginalized groups from using them. While there is widespread consensus about these problems, little evidence exists on how to improve judicial systems for rural, marginalized populations. To address this evidence gap, researchers are evaluating a program intended to strengthen village court systems to better understand ways to provide access to justice among rural populations, and the effect of improved conflict resolution and the “rule of law” on economic activity and other socioeconomic and welfare outcomes.

Context of the evaluation

In 2006, the Government of Bangladesh passed into law a system of village courts that have the power to resolve small disputes, such as cases involving minor theft, physical conflicts with no bloodshed, and other petty non-criminal offences. Overseen by the smallest rural government unit, the Union Parishad (UP), the village courts are intended to increase access to the justice system in rural villages. In theory, these courts should be able to resolve small disputes among local residents at low cost. In practice, the

courts have not formed very frequently and use of the courts has been low.

To improve the effectiveness of the village courts, in 2009 the government of Bangladesh launched a pilot program called Activating Village Courts in Bangladesh (AVCB) that provides physical and human resources to set up courts as well as to increase awareness and use of the courts. In 2016, the government decided to expand the program.

A village court in Bangladesh.

Photo Credit: J-PAL South Asia

Details of the intervention

Innovations for Poverty Action is working with researchers to evaluate the impact of the AVCB program on access to and quality of justice, crime and conflict, and changes in economic activity in villages, as well as individuals' overall assessment of village life. Researchers will randomly assign half of 107 Union Parishads (UPs), each of which covers approximately 3,200 rural households, to receive the AVCB program. The other half of UPs will serve as the comparison group, and will only receive the program after the evaluation.

The AVCB program aims to help UPs to set up their village courts and increase usage of courts among the local population. To establish well-running courts, the program includes intensive training of local government officials on village court law and basic civil and criminal procedure, as well as hiring and training village court assistants to manage case records and reports. The program will also equip courts with necessary furniture and facilities. To encourage local residents to use the courts, the program will run awareness campaigns that disseminate educational materials to increase residents' understanding of the court system. These campaigns will particularly focus on improving the ability of women and the poor to access the courts.

To measure the impact of the ACVB program, researchers will collect data for two years after the start of the program through surveys and administrative data from court system and the village police. Researchers will also collect qualitative data to shed light on the underlying mechanisms driving any impacts. The results of this research will inform future expansions of the ACVB program in Bangladesh and may provide valuable insights for other similar programs around the world.

Results and policy lessons

Project on-going; results forthcoming.