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Timeline
2017-2019

Sample Size
At least 107 administrative areas (3210 households & 428 elected representatives)

Research Implemented by IPA
Yes

Strengthening Village Courts in Rural Bangladesh

Abstract

The government of Bangladesh is trying to strengthen local justice systems in rural areas by establishing close-to-home, low-cost village courts that adjudicated minor disputes between residents. Innovations for Poverty Action is working with researchers to evaluate the impact of the village court system on access to and quality of justice as well as socioeconomic 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 low-income 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 disputes over debt, smaller land disputes, minor

theft, physical conflicts with no bloodshed, and other petty non-criminal offences. Overseen by the lowest tier of rural government, the Union Parishad (UP), the village courts are intended to increase access to the justice in rural areas. In theory, these courts should be able to resolve small disputes among local residents at low cost. In practice, the courts have not been set up in most UPs and usage 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 to approximately 25 percent of Bangladesh's rural areas.

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 6,000 rural households, to receive the AVCB program. The other half of UPs will serve as the comparison group.

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 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 village 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. 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 and reforms 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.

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