A conversation with Paul Niehaus and Carolina Toth, May 28, 2015

Participants

- Paul Niehaus – Co-Founder and President, GiveDirectly
- Carolina Toth –Interim Vice President of Fundraising and Operations, GiveDirectly
- Rebecca Raible – Research Analyst, GiveWell
- Eliza Scheffler – Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Dr. Niehaus and Ms. Toth.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Dr. Niehaus and Ms. Toth of GiveDirectly to learn about GiveDirectly's recent progress. Conversation topics included operational and staffing updates, including an update on the rollout of the Segovia platform and the impact of restructuring transfer schedules in accordance with recipients' preferences.

Operations and staffing update

Adverse events

GiveDirectly recently asked some of its field officers if they had experienced any major issues during the cash distribution process. The field officers did not report any problems.

Cash transfer capacity

Field Directors' monthly capacity for cash transfers has generally remained the same and is not expected to change in the next one to two years. GiveDirectly's current team of field officers can move about $10 million per year in cash transfers; if the number of field officers were doubled, they could handle double the amount. In Kenya, GiveDirectly's team is working at a rate of about $10 million per year. In Uganda, GiveDirectly's current campaign is disbursing $2 million; the model of rolling enrollment, which GiveDirectly uses in Kenya, has not been adopted in Uganda yet.

GiveDirectly is considering shifting Uganda onto more of a rolling model so that both Kenya and Uganda may operate at capacity, given enough funding. However, this approach has not yet been finalized or approved by the board.

Replacement for Stuart Skeates

GiveDirectly has identified a potential replacement for departing Uganda Field Director Stuart Skeates and hopes to make an offer soon. Several other external candidates have applied for the field director position, which may be a sign that GiveDirectly is becoming better known.

Flexible field director

One of GiveDirectly's field directors, Mitch Riley, has been exploring possible future projects for GiveDirectly. For example, Mr. Riley scoped out a potential benchmarking project in Northern Uganda, which would compare cash transfers to transfers of cows in a pre-existing program. Mr. Riley worked on determining whether the project was a good fit for GiveDirectly. GiveDirectly has found work like this valuable and has begun to consider having a "floating" field director who is not assigned to any particular country, but carries out more special or conceptual work.

Segovia platform deployment

Use of Segovia to date

Building the enrollment database has been the focus of GiveDirectly's adoption of Segovia so far. The database must be built to be flexible and responsive to future needs.

The enrollment database contains information gathered by the census team, registration team, and backcheck team. GiveDirectly uses this database to determine cash transfer eligibility, record activities, draw up work plans, and determine which data to audit.

Under GiveDirectly's rolling model (as in Kenya), a field director may update the database daily, as each team needs data from it and may be carrying out activities in quick succession. In Uganda, the database requires updates only about twice a week. Updating previously relied on tedious manual processes, including using Excel sheets, downloading individual surveys, and running and debugging manual scripts. Segovia has automated the process by automatically downloading the surveys and matching them to each other (e.g., the census survey can be matched to the registration and back check surveys automatically).

Version 2.0 of Segovia, which has fewer bugs, saves an estimated 30 minutes of Field Directors' work on each update in Uganda, for a weekly time savings of about one hour. In Kenya, where GiveDirectly is still operating on the original version but will be switching to 2.0 soon, the weekly time savings will be greater because the database is updated daily.

Future plans for Segovia

The Segovia team is now working on payments integration, which will help reduce errors, improve security, and save time. Payments are currently executed with scripts and several manual steps.

GiveDirectly has also been working on various dashboard configurations. For example, GiveDirectly recently looked noticed some field officers straying outside their territory. It would like to build a tool to view enrollments on a map to better monitor where its field teams are operating.

Recipients' preferences on timing of transfers

One of the objectives of one of GiveDirectly's studies is to test various transfer schedules, to learn about recipients' preferences and whether different transfer schedules affect outcomes. For example, the study includes an "early group" (who get a token payment 30 days before being asked about their timing preferences) and a "late group" (who get a token payment five days before being asked for their timing preferences). It is possible that getting a payment soon before making a decision about when to receive the rest of the transfer could lead to recipients making better decisions because they have still have cash on hand from the previous transfer. Results from the study could lead GiveDirectly to change its protocols.

Other parts of the study are primarily of academic interest, such as the affect of IQ on recipients' timing decisions.

Time costs of restructuring transfer schedule

GiveDirectly is tracking costs related to the study and trying to determine whether the effort to change its transfer schedule based on recipient preferences would be worth the benefit to recipients. This change would entail calling recipients to elicit their timing preferences, which would be a new step in GiveDirectly's process, so the cost of the calls would need to be compared to recipients' outcomes.

All GiveWell conversations are available at http://www.givewell.org/conversations