

Conversation with Piali Mukhopadhyay of GiveDirectly, October 20-21, 2014

Participants

- Piali Mukhopadhyay – COO, International, GiveDirectly
- Eliza Scheffler – Research Analyst, GiveWell
- Josh Rosenberg – Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by GiveDirectly.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Piali Mukhopadhyay, COO, International of GiveDirectly, while visiting GiveDirectly in Uganda. Topics discussed in this conversation include:

- Staff fraud in Uganda
- Targeting criteria
- Segovia technology
- GiveDirectly's leadership
- Networking and partnerships

Staff fraud in Uganda

For an overview of the staff fraud, see this blog post that GiveDirectly published after our site visit:

https://www.givedirectly.org/blog_post.php?id=6720123171950519215 (archived version available here: <http://www.webcitation.org/6TrwteHbT>).

After the fraud was discovered, GiveDirectly staff held community meetings to communicate about what had happened.

GiveDirectly decided not to reimburse the funds stolen from recipients, because it did not want to create an incentive for recipients to pretend that additional funds had been stolen in hopes of getting reimbursements.

Targeting criteria

In the villages in GiveDirectly's two Uganda campaigns to date, about 80% of the households are eligible based on its standard criteria (thatch roof, mud walls, mud floor). In Kenya, about 35-45% of the households meet these criteria. GiveDirectly said that it analyzed data on building materials and consumption in Uganda and found a similar correlation to that in Kenya, so it believes that using building materials is still an effective targeting method for reaching the poorest of the poor in Uganda.

Targeting is a massive challenge, and a good core competency for GiveDirectly to refine. GiveDirectly told us that when it meets with government officials about potentially assisting in the implementation of national cash transfer programs, officials often ask about GiveDirectly's targeting capabilities.

GiveDirectly is considering minor modifications to its targeting criteria, but has decided not to focus on that until Segovia technology is fully deployed and the organization has more bandwidth. Such changes would be intended to include among eligible households those that are considered especially vulnerable by their communities despite having iron roofs, such as widows or those with very poor quality iron roofs.

Saturation model

When it experimented with making transfers to all households in a village ("saturation model"), GiveDirectly did not see a major change in its costs or in the number of people "gaming" the system by pretending to be eligible. In a saturation model, people can game by pretending to live within a village GiveDirectly is working in, or by members of the same household pretending to live in separate buildings.

Segovia technology

Currently, GiveDirectly is "knee deep" in testing the Segovia product. This software testing has been a major priority in recent months.

Segovia technology will aggregate data on adverse events from follow up surveys, hotline calls, and in-field reports; it will also enable tracking of each adverse event.

GiveDirectly leadership

Paul Niehaus, GiveDirectly's President, transitioned this year from working part time to full time. Ms. Mukhopadhyay said that it has been good to have Prof. Niehaus working full time, and that it has enabled them to spend a lot more time thinking about partnerships and in-country networking. Prof. Niehaus and Ms. Mukhopadhyay have also worked together to plan for GiveDirectly's potential expansion into Rwanda.

Ms. Mukhopadhyay spends about 60% of her time on "core ops," which refers to non-campaign-specific work like organization building, technology, legal compliance, and networking. The other 40% of her time is spent on campaign-specific work. Ms. Mukhopadhyay noted that the case of fraud in Uganda has caused her to spend more time on campaign-specific work than usual.

Networking and partnerships

Partnering with government officials on government cash transfer programs

Prof. Niehaus and Michael Faye, GiveDirectly Director and Segovia CEO, are traveling to East Africa soon to meet with high-level government officials. In Uganda, Prof. Niehaus and Mr. Faye will be meeting with a Member of Parliament and a Cabinet Minister who contacted GiveDirectly's lawyers to request that GiveDirectly work in the Minister's district.

Forming partnerships with government officials has the benefit of expediting the government approvals process and possibly leveraging public funds. However, working with government could also politicize GiveDirectly's program. Before agreeing to a partnership, GiveDirectly would discuss elements of the program such as targeting and branding. GiveDirectly said that it will determine on a case-by-case basis whether government partnerships are worth pursuing.

GiveDirectly is not interested in fully funding programs for government officials, but it is considering arrangements whereby public money would be matched by philanthropic capital. In Kakamega county, the Governor is administering a conditional cash transfer program fully paid for from county devolution funds. GiveDirectly could advocate for other Governors to run cash transfer programs and provide end-to-end implementation.

Seeking government approvals for GiveDirectly cash transfer campaigns

By now, GiveDirectly understands well the process for seeking government approvals in Kenya and does not see acquiring approvals as a major risk. GiveDirectly said that in Kenya it is important to maintain relationships with government officials at the county and district levels; district commissioners introduce GiveDirectly to chiefs, and chiefs introduce GiveDirectly to village elders. In Uganda, there are no counties, so GiveDirectly coordinates with a few people at the district level to acquire approvals, and from there connect with officials at the local level.

GiveDirectly just received permission to work in Ukwala district in Kenya. The whole approvals process took 2 weeks from the time that Joe Huston (Kenya Field Director) met with the district commissioner to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding.

The people who GiveDirectly is in touch with in Kenya are largely political appointees, so they will likely stay in their positions as long as the current president, Uhuru Kenyatta, is in power. President Kenyatta was elected in 2013 and elections are every 5 years.

As part of its networking in Kenya, GiveDirectly staff have met with the Permanent Secretary for Devolution and Planning. This is someone who could help GiveDirectly acquire permission to work in new counties in Kenya. GiveDirectly staff have also met with people in the technology sector, academia, and the policy space.

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