

A conversation with No Lean Season, August 30, 2017

Participants

- Dr. Karen Levy – Director, Global Innovation, Evidence Action
- Samantha Bastian – Deputy Director, Beta, Evidence Action
- Natalie Duarte – Research Analyst, Beta, Evidence Action
- Sophie Monahan – Research Analyst, GiveWell

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

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Dr. Levy, Ms. Bastian, and Ms. Duarte of Evidence Action about No Lean Season, an Evidence Action Beta program which is a prospective 2017 GiveWell top charity. Conversation topics included No Lean Season's approach to monitoring, its method of checking that lists of households are comprehensive, and the financial monitoring required by law in Bangladesh.

Goals of monitoring

No Lean Season's monitoring builds on the approach that Evidence Action developed for Deworm the World, which it calls Process Monitoring and Coverage Validation (PMCV). "Process monitoring" refers to the verification of program delivery and the quality of program tools in translating inputs into outputs. For example, No Lean Season will monitor offers for possible coercion and corruption. "Coverage validation" refers to the verification of how widely the program was successfully delivered; in this case, checking how many no-interest loan disbursements are made.

Impact evaluation, which requires comparing implementation of the program to a counterfactual situation in which the program is not implemented, is not part of the monitoring plan. Evidence Action is undertaking an RCT of the 2017 program to evaluate and further understand impact, but that is managed separately and is not part of the core program delivery. While No Lean Season's monitoring approach described above is designed to capture issues and irregularities with the delivery of the program and to monitor for some types of risks, one of the goals of this year's RCT is to measure some potential negative effects the program might have at scale.

Plans for monitoring

No Lean Season developed its basic implementation toolkit last year (in 2016). This year (in 2017), it is developing its monitoring plan and refining the plan as the program is implemented.

The monitoring plan needs to closely track the implementation. For example, in order to monitor how the program is presented to potential participants at offer meetings, No Lean Season needs the schedule of offer meetings from RDRS, the non-governmental organization in Bangladesh that is implementing the program. Since the implementation itself is still being refined, this year's monitoring plan will change and adapt.

The current monitoring plan is described in a live document, which No Lean Season is updating throughout this program year. By the end of this program year, the document will contain a full set of protocols for monitoring in future years.

Checking the list of households

The program is built around lists of the eligible households in each village. A complete village census is compiled by RDRS field staff. Evidence Action applies eligibility criteria to this list to compile the list of eligible households. CommCare, the mobile data collection platform used by No Lean Season, links each stage of the program, such as the schedule of informational offer meetings and the disbursement of loaned funds, to the lists of eligible households. Therefore it is important to ensure that the lists cover every village where No Lean Season is operating and every area within each village.

To check that the lists include every village, No Lean Season conducted a village census that captured GPS (Global Positioning System) data for each village.

To verify coverage within villages, No Lean Season sends an independent enumerator to a representative sample of villages. The enumerator visits a household selected from the census list, and asks the same set of questions that RDRS field staff do in their surveys. Then the enumerator visits a household five doors down from the first household and checks that that household is on the census list, and then visits a different cluster of households within the same village.

No Lean Season is in the process of analyzing whether this system of checking the lists of households was successful and should be added to the protocols document, or whether it needs to be modified for future years.

Household eligibility with RDRS

GiveWell asked whether RDRS might want some households to be considered ineligible for No Lean Season due to previous interactions with RDRS, such as not repaying a loan. Dr. Levy thinks that this situation is unlikely because the smallest loans that RDRS has previously offered are much larger than the No Lean Season disbursements, so the households that No Lean Season works with probably have not been offered and probably are not eligible for other RDRS loans. These households may have participated in RDRS programs other than microfinance, but this is unlikely to affect No Lean Season because the No Lean Season program is implemented by the microfinance division of RDRS, which for the most part operates separately from RDRS's non-microfinance activities.

Financial monitoring

Microfinance is tightly regulated in Bangladesh. There is a regulatory board that must approve transfers from Evidence Action to RDRS, and monitors the flow and usage of funding. If RDRS were to misplace No Lean Season funding, it would be held accountable by the Bangladeshi government. Due to the strong regulations, RDRS requires No Lean Season to budget for an independent financial auditor; a Bangladeshi auditing firm has been selected for this purpose.

On a financial due diligence trip to Bangladesh, Dr. Levy looked at RDRS's records and systems and judged them to be reliable. RDRS is successfully running a multimillion-dollar microfinance organization, and is well suited to implementing the No Lean Season program.

A step that No Lean Season might take in the future, as the program increases in scale, is to set up a formal ledger system with RDRS.

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