

IFPRI Podcast Series

Episode 6: The Power of Safety Nets in Egypt

Sivan: Hi and welcome to “Research Talks”, a podcast series that explores how research is making an impact on people and policies (with a focus on the ‘how’), brought to you by the International Food Policy Research Institute, IFPRI. I am your host, Sivan Yosef, and in this episode, we’ll be looking at the power of impact evaluation. Two years ago, IFPRI partnered up with a government ministry in Egypt to evaluate a very, very large safety net program.

Hoda: This is the first time that any Ministry in Egypt conducted an impact evaluation with an international organization.

Minister Nivine: We are strong believers of evaluation and of using research to enlighten us on both policies and programs.

Sivan: This story begins in 2014. Egypt had just gone through the Arab Spring, driven by a call for social justice and food security or bread, and the new government was making sweeping macroeconomic reforms. Here is Minister Nivine El- Kabbag, then Deputy Minister for Social Protection, for the government of Egypt.

Minister Nivine: The issue of having social justice and bread would make the new government try to have a new social contract with the communities to put more highlights on the social protection issues and on the social safety net.

Sivan: In addition to protecting the poor from the impacts of economic reforms, the government was hoping that social protection would begin to address widespread inequality.

Minister Nivine: There were very high disparities between the rich and the poor; and the economic growth was more biased towards certain classes, while leaving other classes behind.

Sivan: In 2007, Egypt had run a pilot conditional cash transfer program. Cash transfer programs give money directly to the poor. Conditional cash transfer programs transfer money to people once they meet certain conditions, like enrolling their kids in school or visiting health clinics. Using lessons from successful programs run in Mexico, Chile, and Brazil, Egypt decided to do a pilot cash transfer program again.

Minister Nivine: We said that let's start with the poorest villages or the poorest governorates. At that time it was six governorates who were the poorest. The plan was to work on six governorates and in 19 villages. It was the first program that actually addresses people, and it was mainly focused on human capital. Maybe at that time the government discourse was more on the infrastructure, development, roads, electricity, networks, and so on. But speaking about the citizen and about the social justice, it clearly tapped on the public demands on social justice. At the beginning, people were not believing that this would really happen. And then with the first payment, we were flooded with many households applying, and we started at that time.

Sivan: The program was being implemented--fast. It's actually two branches of a program. Takaful, which means solidarity, supports poor families with children. It's conditional on health monitoring and school attendance. Karama, which means dignity, supports the elderly poor, orphans, and people living with disabilities. Takaful and Karama had policy support from different ministries, technical support from Latin American countries, and the impact evaluation was managed by the World Bank and funded by the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Minister Nivine: There was very much stress, because it was a new program in Egypt, specifically, with that kind of scope. So, we said that we need to have a process evaluation at the beginning, and then we need also to have a baseline, because we want to see, what impact does it have on people, one. Two, we want to sell it to the government to expand more and more. In order to sell the cause, we need more evidence. We know the value of having an impact evaluation, and the value of having research and evidence before going in depth and with wide scope.

Sivan: Takaful and Karama needed an impact evaluation. Cue IFPRI.

Clemens: My name is Clemens Breisinger. I'm a Senior Research Fellow at IFPRI and I'm heading IFPRI's office in Cairo.

Sivan: So that's Clemens. And here is another IFPRI colleague, Hoda.

Hoda: It's Hoda El Enbaby. So, I'm a research associate at the IFPRI, Cairo, Egypt office. For Takaful and Karama, I was part of the research team, and I was also handling the communication with the Ministry of Social Solidarity.

Sivan: Clemens says that IFPRI was asked to get involved by the Egyptian government.

Clemens: The Ministry of Social Solidarity approached IFPRI, and then we, jointly with other international partners, specifically the World Bank and the UK Government but also several local partners from universities and think tanks, we all were involved in a consultative process to find the best way to do a rigorous impact evaluation to really provide hands-on lessons as to how the Ministry of Social Solidarity can potentially fine-tune their program as it moves along.

Sivan: According to Minister Nivine, the Ministry made it a point to stay involved.

Minister Nivine: Being independent does not contradict with having a participatory approach, and dealing with partners, and with those who are implement the project with no bias, with no anything. So, we made it a point that we need to be involved while keeping the objective part of research and the independent evaluation.

Hoda: The main challenge with the Takaful and Karama impact evaluation was that the Ministry wanted the results very, very soon. So, they were rushing us; because the project had already started.

Minister Nivine: When we started doing the impact evaluation, it was a bit late to have baseline of people, to have a control group.

Clemens: I think one of the key factors for the success was the flexibility both on the side of the Ministry and on the side of IFPRI. So in terms of this flexibility and the spirit, we then decided to do a regression discontinuity design, plus a qualitative evaluation, and the combination of those two guaranteed that we didn't need the baseline survey. We could still do a very rigorous design and we could answer the kind of questions that the Ministry had asked us to answer.

Sivan: That regression discontinuity is a way to compare those households that were eligible to participate and those who were not. Each household that applied for Takaful and Karama got a score meant to capture their overall well-being. It measured things like their education level or whether they had a flushable toilet. Households with scores lower than 4500 were eligible for the program, those above were not. For the regression discontinuity, Clemens and Hoda's team basically compared those that were just above being eligible to those that were just below.

They hired a local firm to survey more than 8,000 households on whether their participation in Takaful and Karama impacted things like their income, school, their kids' dietary diversity, even down to the height and weight of moms and kids.

Hoda: And we also discussed the questionnaires with the Ministry, and we accommodated all of their requests; because one of the different things about this program from other programs in Egypt is that it is conditional on school attendance and health records for children.

And this was actually a challenge because like when we did the survey, when you collected the data, it was in the summertime. So we had to think of ways on how to include this and like how to find the impact on school attendance even though children were not currently, or like back at the time going to school. They were also interested in whether people go to the health centers or not. They were interested in women's empowerment.

Sivan: Remember the piece about women's empowerment—that becomes important later in the story. So all of this quantitative, statistical data is wonderful, but it also needs context. To get this context, the IFPRI team collected qualitative data—they did 61 interviews, and more focus groups and interviews in six different governorates.

Hoda: So for the qualitative evaluation, it wasn't a data collection firm. It was the IFPRI team going to the field. And that was like, for me, one of the best parts of the program; because it was very interesting seeing the beneficiaries and seeing how they live and talking to them and understanding how the program impacts their life. People were very, very hospitable. They would like either take us through the village to the households that we need to visit or like call people to come so that we interview them in their household. They would keep offering us tea, and food and like lunch, and they insisted that we spend the night.

Sivan: This whole endeavor was surprisingly quick.

Clemens: So, I would say the whole process took about one and a half years.

Sivan: And the results?

Clemens: Okay. So the evaluation found that in terms of household consumption expenditure, the impact was comparable to other successful cash transfer programs like Mexico and Brazil.

Minister Nivine: I mean, having IFPRI comparing Egypt to other countries was very good; because actually they built like a standard, or a comparative standard between us and other countries, and Egypt was doing very well compared to other countries who have been implementing this program for 8 and 10 and 15 years. So, the results were good and were assuring.

Clemens: We also found encouraging results on what households spent the money on, and there we found positive impacts on dietary diversity. That means people spend more money of the cash transfer on a more diverse diet, including healthier diets.

Hoda: The qualitative evaluation showed us how the parents were very keen on teaching their children and sending them to school and providing them with good quality education; and the quality of education is one of the issues in Egypt, but I mean, they were keen on at least giving them the best that they can offer.

Clemens: So, one of the potentially surprising results was the mixed impact on women.

Sivan: Remember when I flagged the part about women's empowerment?

Clemens: One may expect that giving the cash to women automatically also empowers them. But there's a growing body of literature from around the world, and including our findings, that especially during the first time that the cash transfer goes to women, there may also be an increase in tensions within the household regarding the allocation, and the decision making about the additional funding. So we found a bit of that.

Hoda: We found that the program is empowering women in other ways. Like, I remember this interesting quote where the lady was saying it's very good this way that the government; that the state is giving the cash or the money. Because in this way, the state has given us dignity. It was very interesting to see how women value the fact that the government is giving an importance to the role of women in terms of caring for their households and, like, supporting their children and stuff.

Sivan: What would you say are the things that made this project successful?

Clemens: I have found a lot of interest, a lot of strong background in evaluation from the Ministry side. That's a very good precondition to work together; because collaboration in such a high-profile program that is of national interest really requires a lot of trust and that trust is best built by a mutual, not only technical understanding, but also constant exchange throughout the whole evaluation period.

Hoda: The Ministry has a huge database of everyone who had applied for Takaful and Karama, and we based our research methodology on that database. And the Ministry was very open about sharing it. And walking us through it for the sake of the impact evaluation. And that was really one of the main factors of success for the evaluation.

Sivan: And what have you done with the results?

Clemens: I think it's really important to work with ministries for the policy impact. But I think as an international organization that IFPRI is, our job is also to provide global public goods. So, it's really important to publish the results which we have done as policy briefs both in English and the local language, which is Arabic in this case.

I think Egypt has learned a lot from other countries in the design of the program and now it's time for Egypt to also share its lessons with other countries, especially in Africa South of the Sahara where more and more countries are also interested in such national programs.

Minister Nivine: So, I think I can say, comfortably, that the results of the research were used in a good manner with the policymakers, with Ministry of Finance to allocate more funds. It helped us to sell the cause and to prove ourselves. What are we doing right? Maybe we should improve this or that. So, our decision is to have the endline in 2020, and to have a baseline for the people who are expected to be graduated; to help us also draw, or put the final touches in our economic employment program. We wanted to know the readiness of the people to move from protection to production. And I think what made us happy, really, is we are strong believers of evaluation and of using research to enlighten us on both policies and programs. So we were very happy as a ministry and as persons of selling the issue of evaluation and data, and its effect on using it as evidence for the policymakers.

Sivan: A big thank you to Minister Nivine El-Kabbag, who is now Minister of Social Solidarity and Social Protection, and to Clemens Breisinger and Hoda El Enbaby for their time. For our listeners, you can read up more by googling IFPRI and Takaful and Karama. Takaful is spelled T-A-K-A-F-U-L and Karama is spelled K-A-R-A-M-A. And don't forget to subscribe to our podcasts so you don't miss a single episode from IFPRI. Til Next Time!