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Reactions from a Control Group in Ghana

A funny thing is happening these days in Northern Ghana. After months and months of planning, we are almost at the point where we give 200 farmers actual cash to use on their maize farms. As with many of IPA's research projects, the participants are selected at random. In other words, we've surveyed 500 farmers about their farming practices, but only 200 will receive capital grants.

The rest will make up the control group, so that we can examine the farmers' returns on the extra capital. This week, the field workers are informing those who will receive capital grants that they have been selected to receive them.

Since the communities are so tiny and it's virtually impossible for a stranger to visit without drawing massive attention to himself – even without distributing cash! – we are also telling the “control” group they have *not* been selected to receive capital grants.

Obviously, I have been feeling completely terrified of the outcome. Imagine that an IPA staff member visits your house, meets with you in private, goes through a whole questionnaire where he asks about how you farm and what you would do with extra money, and then 2 weeks later comes back to say we actually ARE giving money to some people, just not to you. I was already apologetic while going over the scripts with the field workers. But now, 3 days in (and 150 farmers down), things are going ok. Not just ok, but TOTALLY ok. We're ahead of schedule, and I've gotten the exact same number of phone calls this week as I got last week, when all we were doing was surveying.

The reports from the field show not just acceptance from the farmers, but understanding as well. One field worker explained to a certain farmer that he wasn't selected to receive a grant, but the selection was done randomly – as though someone closed their eyes and picked, or as though lots were drawn. Then a neighbor-farmer walked by and said, “No, a computer chose!” “Oh, ok. A computer.” The farmer now understood.

Other reports from the field include a lot of “Oh yes, we know about this. Other NGOs have come here and only given stuff to some of us, because they were testing the idea before giving it to more people.” Or, “This year, there wasn't enough money to give to all.”

As in, there is so much familiarity with Research (capital “R”) that the rural farmers totally understand they are being studied, once again, so that we all can learn about the problems farmers face and try to think of some ways to help them. And not just research, but

randomization – which may be offputting because it translates into give something to some and not to others Research – as well. I guess the readers of this blog would be excited. I’m totally shocked.

In fact, farmers are even saying that IPA is a *serious* NGO, because we’ve already gone to their villages twice! It’s more visits than a lot of other surveyors and NGOs have made in the grand scheme of Northern Ghana Development. Even if visit number two is to say “Sorry, but you’re not getting money,” farmers still seem to appreciate the gesture of the extra visit, and maybe even trust us more in our other efforts as researchers. “Serious” is a pretty big deal compliment in Ghana, too.

So, any other surprising or not-so-surprising stories from the control group in the field?

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