



The Formation of Community-Based Organizations: An Analysis of a Quasi-Experiment in Zimbabwe

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Summary. — Previous analyses of the formation and composition of community-based organizations (CBOs) have used cross section data. So, causal inference has been compromised. We obviate this problem by using data from a quasi-experiment in which villages were formed by government officials selecting and clustering households. Our findings are as follows: CBO co-memberships are more likely between geographically proximate households and less likely between early and late settlers, members of female-headed households are not excluded, in poorer villages CBO co-membership networks are denser and, while wealthier households may have been instrumental in setting up CBOs, poorer households engage shortly afterward.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a renewed policy interest in community-based development (Mansuri & Rao, 2004). This interest is predicated on the idea that community involvement in the planning and execution of policy interventions leads to more effective and equitable development. In practice, community-based interventions are often channeled through Community-Based Organizations (CBOs). In one critical respect this practice is well founded: CBOs often emerge and play an important role in providing public goods and in resolving collective action problems when formal institutions are deficient (Coleman, 1988; Ostrom, 1990; Putnam, 2000). For this reason, they are particularly important in poor countries where the government is unable or unwilling to provide much needed social services, especially in rural areas (Edwards & Hulme, 1995; Fafchamps, 2006).

However, whether effective and equitable development can be achieved by assisting CBOs ultimately depends on their composition and on where they do and do not emerge. If CBOs are composed of local elites, interventions channeled through them are likely to reflect the preferences and interests of those elites (Platteau & Gaspart, 2003). Similarly, if CBOs form along gender or ethnic lines, their mode of operation is likely to reflect the interests of specific gender or ethnic groups rather than the interests of the community as a whole. More generally, if existing socio-economic cleavages are reflected in the composition of CBOs (by exclusion of individuals who do not have certain characteristics or through segmentation) this may negatively affect social cohesion and solidarity (De Bock, 2014). Finally, if CBOs tend not to emerge in the poorest communities, then communities in greatest need of assistance could miss out on important development opportunities. An understanding of the emergence and composition of CBOs is thus of major policy interest.

Arcand and Fafchamps (2012) investigate CBO membership and co-membership, i.e., who is linked to whom as a result of

belonging to the same CBOs in Senegal and Burkina Faso. They find that more prosperous members of rural society are more likely to belong to CBOs and that members of ethnic groups that traditionally focus on raising livestock rather than on crop cultivation are less likely to belong to CBOs. They also find that CBO membership is assortative on wealth and ethnicity, i.e., that the wealthy tend to group with the wealthy and the poor with the poor, and that different ethnic groups tend not to group together. These are the sort of group formation patterns that ought to be of potential concern for development practitioners.

In common with a large literature on the role of social networks in risk and information sharing within agrarian communities of Africa (e.g., De Bock, 2014; De Weerd, 2004; Dekker, 2004; Fafchamps & Gubert, 2007; Krishnan & Sciubba, 2009; Udry & Conley, 2004), Arcand and Fafchamps (2012) rely on cross-section data. This literature provides vital descriptive information on group composition, but cannot always satisfactorily address issues of causality. Specifically, it cannot always tell whether similarities cause people to associate with one another or whether association causes people to become more similar.¹ The issue of reverse causation does not arise for gender or ethnicity since these are, in principle, immutable. But when the characteristics of

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interest are income, wealth, and prosperity broadly defined, causal ambiguity needs to be resolved. Furthermore, cross-sectional data do not facilitate the identification of causal effects running from community composition to CBO formation, an issue that arises both for mutable characteristics such as wealth as well as, via selection effects, for immutable individual characteristics such as gender and ethnicity.

In this paper, we obviate these concerns by focusing on data from a *de facto* quasi-experiment resulting from actions taken over a quarter of a century ago by the, then, newly formed Zimbabwean government. After the Zimbabwean war of independence in 1980, many people displaced by the fighting were resettled in newly created villages. These resettled villages were created by government officials selecting households from lists of applicants.² Thus, unlike traditional villages that are organized along kinship lines, these new villages brought together households that were typically unacquainted with each other, often of different lineage and diverse in terms of wealth (Dekker, 2004).³ Yet, in order to survive and prosper, the inhabitants of these newly created villages had to solve various collective action problems relating to natural resource management, risk management, indivisibilities in inputs to agrarian production, and inadequate access to financial and other services. The creation of new villages with households selected at random forms a quasi-experiment that offers a unique opportunity to study the community formation process.⁴

The nature of the quasi-experiment is similar to the random assignment of roommates to dorms or classes studied by Sacerdote (2001) and others (e.g., Lyle, 2007; Shue, 2012) or to the random assignment of entrepreneurs to judging committees engineered by Fafchamps and Quinn (2012). The difference is that we do not use random assignment to study peer effects but rather to study assorting and group formation between people who have been randomly brought together. Perhaps the closest analogy to what we do is the Big Brother TV show: people from different backgrounds are thrown together into the House, and viewers study the friendships and cliques they form over time. In this case, the government of Zimbabwe grouped previously unassociated households together in new villages and we study the CBOs those households form over time.

We show that, to varying degrees, the 15 studied villages addressed collective action problems by setting up CBOs. We investigate CBO formation using data on the geography of the newly formed villages, kinship and lineage networks between resettled households, and the characteristics of the households at the time of their resettlement. We focus our analysis on two specific questions—who groups and who groups with whom—using only household characteristics at the time of resettlement. We investigate for how long these characteristics affect CBO formation and co-membership over time. We focus our analysis on CBOs that have an economic—as opposed to purely social—purpose. Earlier analysis (Barr *et al.*, 2012) shows that co-memberships in these CBOs are more predictive of group formation in incentivized lab-type experiments, suggesting that, relative to other co-memberships, they are stronger and probably more valuable.

We make use of a unique dataset combining information from multiple sources: a panel survey of households that ran from 1983 to 2000; detailed retrospective data on CBO membership collected in 2000; genealogical data collected in 1999 and 2001; lineage data collected in 2001 and 2009; and village geography data collected in 1999 and 2009. Merging, completing,

and reconciling (to the extent possible) these datasets took many months of work by the authors and researchers in the field in Zimbabwe. To our knowledge this is the first dataset on small farming communities that combines detailed information on socio-economic characteristics with a wide range of intra-village social ties over such a long period of time.

The analysis reveals that the studied communities do not appear to be elitist. We find that, by the end of 1982, at a time when almost 90% of sampled households had settled in the new villages, wealthier households had already formed CBOs to serve a variety of economic purposes. Poorer households initially tended not to engage in CBOs but, by 1983, this difference had disappeared. Wealthier households may have been the ones who initiated CBOs because clearing land, planting crops, and building houses on uninhabited land proved easier for them. What is remarkable is that poorer households were allowed to join without apparent prejudice as and when their circumstances allowed.

The analysis further shows that the network of CBO co-memberships is denser in poorer villages. Why this is the case is not entirely clear. One possibility is that they had a greater need to organize in order to address indivisibilities in agrarian inputs and to cope with risk. This pattern persists throughout the eighteen post-resettlement years covered by our dataset. In addition, we find strong evidence *against* the separation of female- and male-headed households into different CBOs. There is, however, some evidence that the female-headed households are involved in fewer CBOs. Cause for concern is raised only by evidence that those who settled early and those who settled late associate less with one another than those who settled at the same time. There is also weak evidence that non-Zimbabwean households are less engaged in CBO activities. Within these small resettled villages, geographical proximity affects CBO co-membership only in early years: by 1985 we observe no effect of proximity on who groups with whom. The effect of kinship on co-membership is similarly occasional and ephemeral. Shared lineage has no bearing on co-membership, although, at the community level, we find evidence that shared lineage and CBO activity are substitutes.

Since households in our dataset generally had little to no interaction with one another before they came to the new villages, these findings can be fairly safely given a causal interpretation. But there is a downside: given their artificial creation process, the study villages are not representative of developing-country villages in general or even of Zimbabwean villages. This limitation of the study needs to be born in mind when considering the external validity of our findings. It should be noted, however, that new communities made up of displaced people are not uncommon in the developing world, especially in post-conflict situations. In this context, findings such as ours are both rare and of potential value to development practitioners.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we introduce various hypotheses of interest regarding CBO formation in resettled villages, and we propose an empirical model that distinguishes between them. In this model co-membership in CBOs is a function of geographical, social, and economic proximity. In Section 3 we describe our data sources in detail. In Section 4 we present descriptive statistics regarding the evolution of CBO co-memberships between from 1980–2000 in each of the fifteen villages in our sample. In Section 5 we present estimation results for an extensive series of regressions corresponding to the specification presented in Section 2. In Section 6 we present a circumspect (owing to the fact that there are only fifteen villages in our sample) but nevertheless informative analysis of CBO co-membership at the

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