

Negotiated Validity: Three Perspectives on IFPRI-PROGRESA's Sampling

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Mexico's Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), Progresa,¹ began in 1997 as an innovative social policy idea and grew to become the nation's flagship anti-poverty program. One of the factors in the program's early survival and potent influence was the integration of an independent impact evaluation done by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), a prestigious DC-based think tank. The IFPRI-Progresa evaluation spearheaded broad changes, not only in Mexican social policy, but also around the world, impelling both the CCT and Evidence-Based Policy (EBP) movements. Also, as one of the first large-scale Randomized-Control Trial (RCT) research projects ever implemented in social program evaluation, IFPRI-Progresa provided (and continues to provide) an important proof-of-concept, a paragon of the methodology's potential extolled by proponents and held aloft before critics.

Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs):

CCTs constitute one of three newly prominent branches within the field of international development (the other two being microfinance and unconditional cash transfers). In Latin America, various forms of the CCT now cover almost every country, and are the largest social programs in Brazil and Mexico, the region's two most populous countries. In general, CCTs target a disadvantaged subsection of a population and provide cash payments *conditional on* the fulfillment of requirements designed to boost human capital development (e.g. attendance in school, regular medical checkups, family planning sessions), thereby both mitigating present poverty and breaking the inter-generational poverty cycle.

At the same time, however, IFPRI-Progresa was not without flaws in both design and practice. As part of a Master's thesis² project, the author reviewed the evaluation's documentation and the larger cloud of literature which emerged from the exercise, zooming in on features which could serve as bases of productive criticism. In particular, discrepancies and ambiguous language surrounding the project's sample selection procedure received added attention because of their pertinence to the now globalized and perennial debate surrounding the usage of RCTs in policy-making.

This article summarizes the author's attempts to answer the question, "what was IFPRI-Progresa's sampling procedure?" using an approach derived from 'complexity.' Without going into too much detail, the idea was to overlay the answers (plural) to the research question with three different sets of background information and connect them with various contexts, so as to (by way of metaphor) cook the same ingredients into three different dishes and hopefully gain a more holistic understanding of the situation. From each perspective the analysis attempts to show different facets of this massively complicated project, draw different conclusions, and convey a different overall impression.

The takeaway is that no complete, seamless story of how IFPRI-Progresa did their sampling procedure exists, and the opacity of the descriptions of this process is but one of many intricacies which later endorsements of IFPRI-Progresa tend to ignore. There are conventional lessons on the importance of clear and consistent documentation here, but most importantly the case displays how the complexity approach allows different perspectives to engage in conversation, thus pluralizing the potential pathways of action and providing the foundations of customized, appropriate, and constructive critiques. Contemporary users must internalize a more complex, hazy vision of how IFPRI-Progresa unfolded.

Sampling: The Process Perspective

An RCT (or 'experimental design') requires that units of investigation be randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. The IFPRI-Progresa project received global attention because the vast majority of documentation and sources claim that the study design randomly assigned communities in such a manner, thus minimizing concerns of sample selection bias. Looking deeper into the original documentation, however, one finds that the story remains unclear and the vocabulary used is often confusing and contradictory. The primary points of confusion are:

Phrasing

- *Intermediate Sample Universes:* Several sources mention two intermediately-sized universes from which the 330 treatment and 191 control communities were drawn (of 4,546 and 1,850 communities, respectively), where normally these two groups would have been selected from the overall universe of communities eligible for the program. The methodology and reasoning behind this added step is completely unexplained.
- *Phased Incorporation:* Similarly, a small subset of sources (including a book by the individual who directed the sampling) indicate that the selection "[took] advantage of the calendar of incorporation."³ Although never explicitly connected, the intermediate universes could plausibly correspond to communities designated to different phases. Still, how communities were originally assigned to different phases of incorporation, and whether this was done before or as a part of the sampling (the fine line between an experimental/quasi-experimental design) remains undefined.
- *Matching Process:* Several sources allude to (but never fully explain) a matching process based on community characteristics. The multi-step matching procedure seems rather arduous, however, and it is difficult to imagine how such a process would have been accomplished given the uneven sizes of the treatment and control groups.

Vocabulary

- *Experiment vs. Quasi-Experiment vs. Natural Experiment:* beyond the various potential interpretations of how the sampling procedure was implemented, there appears to be disagreement on whether the procedure qualified as an experimental or quasi-experimental design. In some cases, the characterization appears to shift even within the same document, or between translations.
- *Randomized vs. Randomly Selected vs. Randomly Assigned:* Whereas an experimental design randomly assigns communities to treatment and control groups, random selection does not necessarily imply an experimental design. Randomly selecting treatment and control groups from two separate universes is akin to randomly selecting apples from a barrel of apples, and oranges from a box of oranges. Vague statements regarding 'random selection' litter the IFPRI-Progresa literature. The crucial omission of from where communities were randomly selected leaves open the possibility of a quasi-experimental design.

Sampling: The Academic Perspective

IFPRI-Progresa was not isolated, but instead occurred within the larger context of debate regarding evaluation methodologies, particularly the usage of RCTs in policy evaluation. The ascension of RCT over the past decades has not come without controversy, and the debate stemming from calls for more experiments in evaluation, with its critiques, rebuttals, and counter-rebuttals, is now widespread.

Set against this intellectual backdrop, the gravity of the distinction between experimental and quasi-experimental falls like a guillotine's blade:

"In Mexico, the experimental design played a critical role in increasing the impact and visibility of the evaluation."⁴

What if one of the most widely-eulogized experiments in the history of development economics was not actually experimental at all?

The evolution towards a pure, simple, unproblematic, and randomized experimental sample selection process would not seem so surprising when contextualized within an economics-heavy environment laden with omnipresent pressures for experimentally-derived results. Many authors have depicted the ubiquity of these "drift[s]," "detours," or "free moves" within academic writing.⁵ Instead of some evil soul scheming behind closed doors to trick the rest of the research community, the academic perspective portrays a large, loosely interconnected network of individuals laden with responsibilities, time pressures, and power relationships, who may have simply gravitated towards the predominant zeitgeist within their environment.

Sampling: The Political Perspective

IFPRI-Progresa was also concocted and executed within a vibrant political environment, already ripe with various predispositions about science, RCTs, poverty, social policy, and CCTs. Three hulking trends cast their shadows over the project:

- *Evidence-Based Policy*: On the global stage, the ascension-to-prominence of EBP, which rests in part on the mutation of the methodological landscape which has brought the RCT to the fore, a design which putatively provides "results that are defensible in both the seminar room and the legislative hearing."⁶
- *Conditional Cash Transfers*: CCTs constitute one of three newly prominent branches within the field of international development (the others being microfinance and unconditional cash transfers). IFPRI-Progresa expedited the growing acceptance of CCTs as viable poverty reduction tools.
- *Political/Administrative Turnover*: By the time Progresa began to form in the heads of Mexican social policy designers, public debate surrounding the politicization of PRI⁷ social policies was widespread. As part of PRI President Zedillo's push to de-politicize social assistance programs, one IFPRI-Progresa's main objectives was to prove the program's apolitical status by sustain it through the change in presidential administrations, a feat never before accomplished by a Mexican social program. With

the election of Vicente Fox from the PAN (National Action Party), it became clear that Progresá would also need to stand fast through the first changeover of the national ruling party in seventy-one years.

When IFPRI became involved, "Progresá was already committed to the...evaluation design...and IFPRI's role was to support and reinforce this commitment."⁸ Given the delicate political situation, accusations of fissures in this design by the IFPRI team would have risked igniting controversy, derailing the entire project, erasing years of hard-won progress, setting social policy in Mexico back at least five years, and condemning future evaluation projects with similarly honorable objectives to even more insurmountable political barriers. Couching the evaluation project within this ambience of excitement regarding CCTs, the use of the social sciences to inform policy, and the momentous transformation of Mexican federal government, illuminates the extent of the power placed in the hands of the IFPRI-Progresá team. If IFPRI-Progresá went awry, became embroiled in controversy, or was simply ignored, then the social policy experts, lobbyists, policy-makers, and the development-focused public worldwide would cast their money and their attention elsewhere. If, however, the team could construct a clean, apolitical, and positive image of the program, there was an enormous opportunity to put wind in the sails of CCTs, bolster the credibility of EBP worldwide, and sustain the direct flow of cash to poor Mexicans.

Pathways Forwards

For all of the facts, ideas, and relationships uncovered here, the perspectives just presented still do not agree. There seems to be no coherent, unifying narrative, no seamless truth about the situation. This opacity, however, is precisely the environment with which evaluators, academics, and politicians must come to grips in social policy evaluation. Plunging into the fog using a complexity-based approach does not provide incontrovertible truths, quick answers, or clear paths of action, but instead a plurality of information types, perspectives, and potential trajectories.

- *Academia + Policy ≠ Academia:* The current EBP-friendly atmosphere has brought academia and politics progressively closer together. Like ink and water, when mixing social science and policy together, one cannot re-extract pure social science.
- *Think about the Results of the Results:* The impeccable image of IFPRI-Progresá commonly forwarded stands on fragile foundations, but perhaps it was precisely the myopia of this image which managed to cut through the resistance and jolt Mexican social policy out of the viscous cycles of political patronage and constant overturn.
- *Concerning Complexity:* The reorientation obligated by complexity thinking requires opening the conventional [cause > effect > outcome > judgment] structure. There may be a trail of evidence with which to argue that IFPRI researchers smoothed over the intricacies of the sampling in order to help IFPRI-Progresá gain academic or political clout, but through the complexity lens this linear blame-casting appears naive. The evaluation project developed in tandem with its actors, their history, and context in such a way that clear causal paths become clouded.

- *Details Matter*: Research is not just about method, but also crucially about practice, and small decisions can count a lot. Even the most airtight methodologies in the hands of the most adroit applicators still have their Achilles' heels.
- *The critical mindset*: Current evaluation researchers must appreciate that no dosage of mathematics and theory can translate human activity into knowledge without heavy human involvement in the process. Objectivity must be replaced as a goal with the instillation of a critical mindset. This is what evaluators must bring to the table, and it runs much deeper than methodology, disciplinary backing, or anything else that fits on a curriculum vitae.

Conclusion

The problem is that the pathway between the current state of affairs and a better one, much like the pathway between now and a Mexico without poverty and deprivation, is long, complex, and incomprehensible to any single person or from any single viewpoint. IFPRI-ProgresA demonstrates how social policy evaluation, at the blurry margins of policy and academia, is complex. Change in this field can (and must) emerge from a variety of quarters - policymakers, researchers, funders, and students. For all of these individuals, taking time to think deeply and introspectively about their stance on social policy evaluation should become a basic part of the evaluation itself. There is no step-by-step formula for success; each moment depends on the last. Contrarian thinking, impassivity, and artful articulation must lead the way forwards.

1. *Programa de Educación, Salud y Alimentación* (Education, Health, and Nutrition Program, PROGRESA); now 'Oportunidades.'

2. Full document available at www.wnfaulkner.com.

3. Author's translation from Spanish: Daniel Hernández Franco, *História de Oportunidades: Inicio y cambios del programa*, (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008), 107.

4. Susan W. Parker, Luis Rubalcava, and Graciela Teruel, "Evaluating Conditional Schooling and Health Programs," in *Handbook of Development Economics*, edited by T. P. Schultz and John Strauss (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008), 4025.

5. Bruno Latour, *Science in Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), Chapter 3; Esther-Mirjam Sent, "Resisting and Accommodating Thomas Sargent: Putting Rational Expectations Economics through the Mangle of Practice," in *The Mangle in Practice* edited by Andrew Pickering and Keith Guzik (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

6. Joshua D Angrist and Jörn-steffen Pischke, "The Credibility Revolution in Economics : How Better Research Design is Taking the Con out of Econometrics" 24, no. 2 (2010), 4.

7. *Partido Revolucionario Insititucional*, Institutionalized Revolutionary Party.

8. David Coady in Jere R. Behrman, "Policy-Oriented Research Impact Assessment (PORIA) Case Study on the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the Mexican PROGRESA Anti-Poverty and Human Resource Investment Conditional Cash Transfer Program." *Impact Assessment Discussion Paper* (Washington, DC: IFPRI, 2007), 86.