# Targeting the Ultra Poor in Extremely Fragile Contexts

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The previous case study illustrated that government-run safety net systems provide a platform to scale-up highly effective multifaceted interventions that target the ultra poor. However, do these interventions also work in countries affected by fragility, conflict, and violence?

## Common Perceptions

Since 2013, DIME has worked to evaluate the IDA-financed Afghanistan Access to Finance Project (A2F) and measure the impact of the Targeting the Ultra Poor (TUP) Program—a US$15 million component of the Access to Finance Project. At the time, there was skepticism that such a complex, multifaceted program that included productive assets transfer, training, stipends, regular coaching, and mentoring could be implemented in a fragile context such as Afghanistan. The price tag of nearly $2000 per household generated considerable debate: why spend so much on so few, rather than spreading the resources out to support more people?

## Questions We Should Be Asking

The debates reflected a very real challenge: there is little evidence about what works in countries affected by fragility, conflict, and violence (FCV), and it is often unclear how to effectively direct the significant financial support on offer. As the World Bank scales up its support to FCV countries, directing these resources efficiently becomes a first-order concern.

The collaboration faced numerous hurdles. The first challenge was whether something as complex as the TUP program could be implemented in a setting like Afghanistan. DIME worked with the implementing partner and the World Bank Group's Finance, Competitiveness, and Innovation Global Practice to develop a rigorous set of monitoring tools to carefully track what was being implemented where. DIME also collaborated on a series of workshops that introduced tools and evidence from other settings to help give the project its best chance of success.

The second challenge was political pressure to redirect the funds to other initiatives given the high per capita costs of the intervention. In early 2016, the government considered closing the TUP program before implementation began. However, at the time, evidence of the transformational impact of the program in other countries was beginning to surface (Banerjee et al. 2015). DIME worked with the project task team leader to package the existing evidence and make the case to continue supporting the TUP program, despite initial concerns. Based on a more concrete understanding of the program's potential, the government eventually agreed with the World Bank to proceed with the TUP.

The third challenge was how to generate high-quality evidence in a setting where World Bank staff are restricted from traveling outside of Kabul. DIME developed a set of quality assurance tools in collaboration with the implementing partner and launched one of the first tablet-based surveys in the country in 2016. These tools are now being packaged to help other teams improve data quality in fragile settings.

To assess the impacts of programming, 1,219 of the poorest households from 80 villages in Balkh province were randomly assigned to a treatment or control group. Women in treatment households received a one-off "big push" package, including a transfer of livestock (typically cows, and occasionally sheep or goats, worth approximately US$1,312 PPP), a consumption stipend of US$54 PPP delivered in 12 monthly installments, skills training, access to savings accounts and savings encouragement, facilitation of access to health care services, and coaching through biweekly visits for one year. Control households did not receive any of the program components.

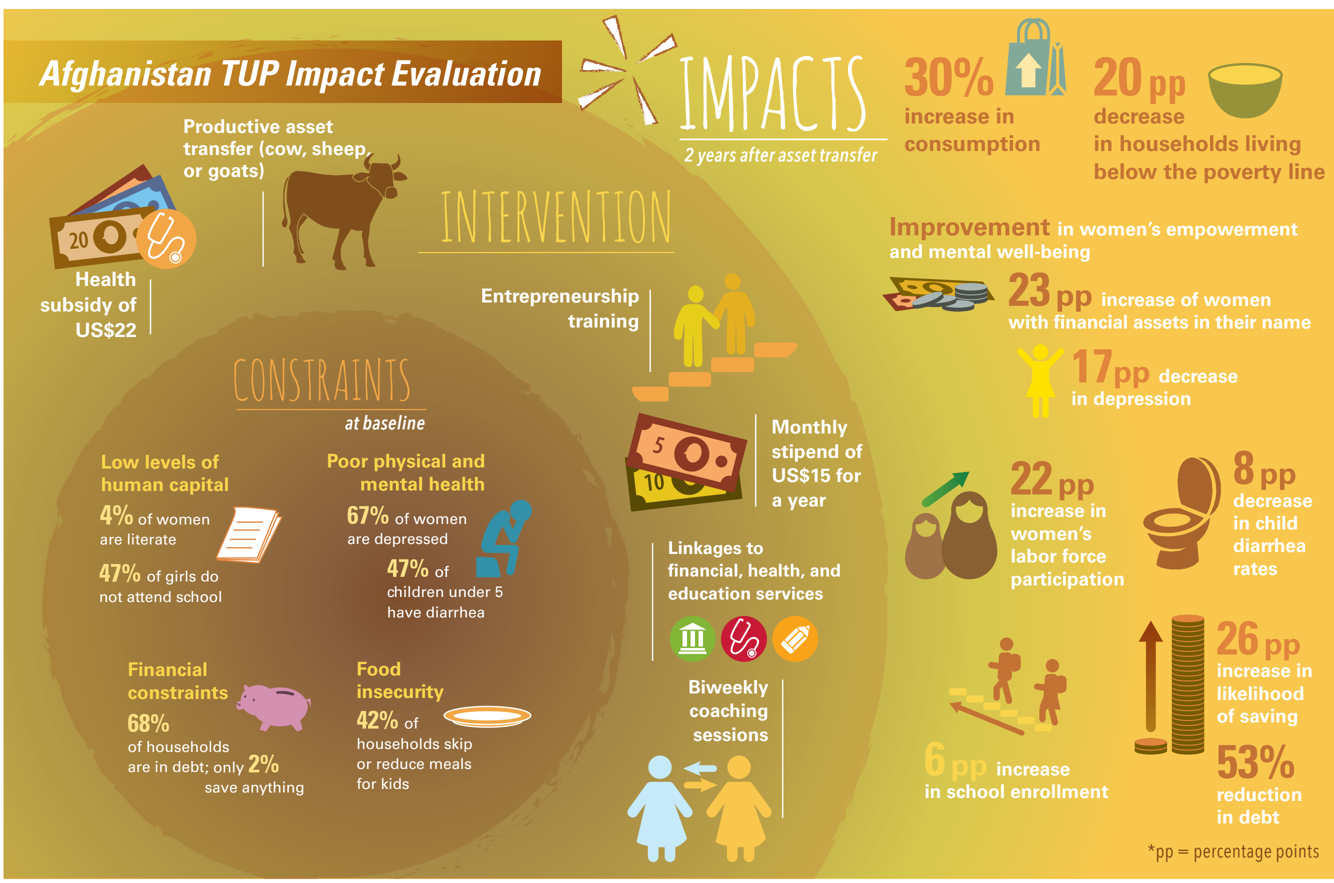
## Our Findings

The impact evaluation results highlighted the program's value and offered a tangible example of what can be achieved in FCV settings to improve the lives of the world's poorest and most vulnerable (see figure 2.5). The TUP program increased household consumption by 30 percent and reduced poverty by 20 percentage points, with a conservatively estimated 26 percent internal rate of return and a benefit-cost ratio of 2.3. Even with very modest assumptions, the impact evaluation engagement, costing approximately $1 million, likely paid for itself by helping ensure the program was delivered, and documenting its success.

## Policy Implications

The success of the program offers a roadmap for how to tackle poverty in FCV countries, and has

**Figure 2.5** The Afghanistan TUP Impact Evaluation Summary



influenced the views of high-level World Bank management, the World Bank Group's Finance, Competitiveness, and Innovation Global Practice, and the World Bank Group's Social Protection and Jobs Global Practice.

*This case study is based on an impact evaluation conducted within DIME's Gender, Economic Opportunity and Fragility research program. See: Bedoya, Guadalupe,* Aidan Coville,* Johannes Haushofer, Mohammad Isaqzadeh, and Jeremy Shapiro. 2019. "No Household Left Behind: Afghanistan Targeting the Ultra Poor Impact Evaluation." Policy Research Working Paper 8877, World Bank, Washington, DC.*

## REFERENCES


Bedoya, Guadalupe,* Aidan Coville,* Johannes Haushofer, Mohammad Isaqzadeh, and Jeremy Shapiro. 2019. "No Household Left Behind: Afghanistan Targeting the Ultra Poor Impact Evaluation." Policy Research Working Paper 8877, World Bank, Washington, DC. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/31867.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