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Dissertation review for Ella Sargsyan (CERGE-EI)

This is a very good thesis, and I truly enjoyed reading it.

The first chapter investigates the effectiveness of home production, particularly the cultivation of potatoes, in mitigating the adverse effects of economic shocks on child health during the transition period following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Using data from post-Soviet countries, the study emphasizes the positive impact of growing potatoes on suitable lands in alleviating child malnutrition and height disparities.

The second chapter explores the impact of violent conflicts on parents' preferences for the gender of their children in Nigeria. It highlights the different effects of different types of conflict events on preferences for sons and daughters: conflicts with low numbers of civilian casualties increase preferences for sons, while those with more civilian casualties do the opposite.

The third chapter delves into the enduring effects of the 1988 Armenian Earthquake on women's stated preferences about the gender of their children, revealing a significant increase in the preference for male children among women interviewed on or around the earthquake commemoration date.

I think that all chapters make innovative and meaningful contributions to the strands of the economic literature to which they relate.

Below I make some comments and suggestions about the three chapters that the author might want to consider before submitting for publication the articles to academic journals. None of my comments here should be considered binding recommendations necessary to proceed with the defense of the dissertation.

Chapter 1

-There is some evidence in this chapter that growing potatoes might not always have been a good idea, at least when the soil was not suitable. When discussing figure 1.9 this negative effect is attributed to income effects (richer households do not need to grow potatoes at home). I wonder whether you could also test whether growing potatoes on unsuitable soil was sometimes a “mistake”. You do already something similar to this in your placebo exercise. Would it be possible perhaps to check whether households are maximizing the nutritional value/calories of what they grow at home (possibly also then through bartering/selling)? The idea is to distinguish between two possibilities. First, those who cultivated potatoes on unsuitable soil were still doing the best they could; or second, they were leaving some calories on the table by not cultivating something else.

-Along these lines, I wonder also whether you could think of an analysis where you don't look only at potatoes but at home production more in general. You could perhaps build an index of suitability to calories combining suitabilities for different crops, and use that to instrument from actual calories from what was grown. The analysis would be the same as you did already.

-I did not understand why the coefficient on Exposure to Transition is not significant (and often positive), and only the interaction with having grown potatoes (on unsuitable soil) is negative and significant. The explanation based on income offered for Figure 1.9 does not apply here, since you are controlling for income. It would be good to expand on this (and again, I wonder whether this means that these families were making “mistakes” or not).

- It would be great to guide the reader on how to explain your IV estimates. If we interpret them as LATE estimates, it is clear that the effect that you estimate is larger than it would be for the average household (those induced to cultivate by the instrument – suitability to potatoes – are also those for which the effect would be larger).

- In order to understand the validity of the instrument, it would be good to discuss whether suitability to potatoes is correlated with suitability with other crops and also if potato cultivation is correlated with cultivation of other crops.

Chapter 2

- Baland, Cassan, and Vitrin have a working paper on detecting the use of stopping rules and selective abortion. You might want to take a look and see whether you can apply their strategy in your context (this might be valid also for Chapter 3 perhaps).

- Since you are not simply comparing conflict to no conflict, but instead also

different types of conflict, I think you want to do the same in Table 2.B1 and see whether there are differences between different types of conflicts.

- In Table 2.2 you might want to add interactions between the type of conflict and the indicator for civilian deaths, to see whether the types of conflict have differential effects only because of civilian deaths or also for other reasons.

- It would be good to discuss whether, beyond the number of civilian deaths, there are other important differences between the different types of conflict that might affect preferences (and possibly to test whether these other differences matter).

Chapter 3

- Is the effect of December 7 present both for wave 2010 and for wave 2014-15?

- A small survey experiment where you first prime a random group of women about the earthquake (but not another), and then ask questions similar to those in the DHS could do a lot to show the robustness of the results. Such a survey could also be useful to think a bit more about mechanisms (what is it about the earthquake that makes women prefer sons?)

- Is there already a literature showing what is the effect of natural disasters on the gender preferences of parents? If this hasn't been done yet, then it might be a good idea to expand the analysis beyond Armenia and test whether after earthquakes there is indeed evidence of skewed sex ratios. The advantages of doing this would be to have more external validity and to have a hard outcome beyond stated preferences. The evidence from DHS surveys in Armenia would then be a very good way of showing that the ratios are changing because of changes in preferences.

To reiterate, in my opinion, this thesis satisfies both formal and content requirements for a PhD thesis in economics. The comments above are to be considered as suggestions, and not as binding recommendations. Indeed, I recommend the dissertation for defense as it is.

Kind Regards,

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