

PEOPLE OF NOVAFRICA: STEFAN LEEFFERS

Stefan Leeffers, from the Netherlands, is a husband, father of three daughters, a consultant at the World Bank and a PhD candidate in Economics at Nova School of Business and Economics. He received his bachelor's degree in Economics from Tilburg University, but it was his volunteering experience that led him to focus on development economics. In the end, Stefan chose Nova SBE and the INSPER University in São Paulo, Brazil, to pursue a Master's in Economics, with the intent of learning Portuguese, a widely spoken language in the African continent.

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During his master's, Stefan participated in his first field experiment. He coordinated field teams in a project in Mozambique, whose data would later be used in Batista and Vicente (2021) . This research project studies how mobile money was adopted in rural Mozambique. This experience allowed Stefan to not only learn Portuguese, but ultimately led him to realize that he wanted to pursue a PhD.

Stefan's main research interests surround development economics, environmental economics, behavioral economics, as well as political economy. His research perfectly reflects these areas.

One of the first papers Stefan coauthored came in 2018. Jointly with Professor Pedro Vicente, he studied what would be the impact of electoral observers, domestic and international, on Mozambique's 2009 general elections. This paper, "Does Electoral Observation influence electoral results? Experimental Evidence for Domestic and International observers in Mozambique", was published in World Development. With the aim of reducing electoral fraud, observers were randomly assigned during the 2009 elections, and, while domestic observers stayed in the same ballot table for the whole day, international observers circulated across several ballot locations. The hypotheses being tested with this experiment consisted in the reduction of ballot fraud due to the presence of electoral observers, and that this reduction would be larger in some provinces than in others, according to the dominant party in the region. Another hypothesis that was tested was that the presence of electoral observers may have led to a shift of fraudulent activities to polling locations without an observer. Finally, this research also tested if the presence of domestic fixed observers reduced ballot fraud more than the presence of international mobile observers. The objective was to test what was the effect of the observer on the levels of turnout, invalid votes and blank votes. By using the electoral results for the 2004 and 2009 elections, Stefan and Vicente found that domestic observers had a significant effect in discouraging ballot fraud, given that ballot box stuffing and the validation of blank notes seemed to be prevented. Nevertheless, no evidence was found that international observers could deter ballot fraud. This ambiguity in the results can be explained by the fact that international organizations select convenient districts to place their observers.

Another stream of literature that Stefan has contributed to is education. He participated in a research project in Angola, which aimed at involving the community, particularly the parents, in children's education. The main findings of this project will be embodied in a forthcoming paper, "Mobilizing Parents at Home and at School: An African experiment on primary education", Di Maro et al. (2022). The experiment included three treatment arms: an information campaign at home, parents' meetings at the school level and a cross-treatment combination of both. This study was conducted in primary schools in the Angolan province of Kwanza Sul and the data was obtained through surveys, administrative data, and direct observation. This research project additionally designed and developed lab-in-the-field experiments with both parents and teachers. The authors distinguished four types of treatment effects: a direct treatment effect on parents and an indirect treatment effect on: school management and facilities; teachers' behavior (namely teachers' absenteeism and their performance as perceived by parents); and student performance. The results showed that the information campaign increased parents' involvement at home, but no impact was found on the engagement with the schools, while the meetings had the opposite effects. Only the combination of both treatments improved school management and facilities, teachers' behavior, and parents' satisfaction. Some of the games conducted in the lab-in-the-field experiment include a public goods game, a modified dictator game and a trust game aiming at measuring social cohesion and trust in teachers. The detailed results of the modified dictator game performed in the lab-in-the-field experiment will be included in a separate forthcoming paper .

Through his work with the World Bank , Stefan developed an interest in disaster management. He is mostly working as a consultant in the Caribbean islands. Some of his contribute includes a Post-Disaster Needs Assessment, that aimed at evaluating the impact of the recent outbreak of Covid-19 in the Dutch island, Bonaire, and a Sustainable Development report.

Such experiences have driven him to focus more on environmental economics and motivated him to write his job market paper: "It will rain: The effect of information on Flood Preparedness in Urban Mozambique". With this project, Stefan set out to test how poor households could become more resilient to floods in urban Mozambique. To do this, a large-scale randomized experiment was conducted across 300 communities, that received information treatments regarding flood risks and possible strategies to mitigate them. The number of targeted families was different across the treatment groups, which received the information through different channels. In some cases, the team showed videos during home visits, while in other cases only text messages were sent. Stefan's goal was to understand what were the information channels that promoted a change in behaviors. The sources of data used included several rounds of household and community leader surveys, behavioral measurement, and observation data. In fact, photos were taken of drainage canals to be evaluated by an algorithm, with the goal of assessing the reduction of trash in these areas. The results found that there was indeed a reduction of solid waste near the canals in the treated communities. Furthermore, the surveys to non-targeted households in the treated communities demonstrated the existence of spillover effects. Therefore, these findings show that information interventions can be a cost-effective method to incentivize local communities to act and ultimately to become more resilient to flooding.

This paper contributes to the intersection of the existing literatures in environmental and development economics. Stefan evaluates how less developed countries are being affected by climate change and studies the way these populations can become more resilient to this crisis . Stefan developed this project from the ground up, by designing the randomized controlled trial experiment by himself, which proved to be a challenge, but also gave him a new set of skills. "You have to learn

very fast and now I know a lot about RCT experiments”, Stefan said during an interview. But he also recognized the importance of working in a team:

“Novafrica support was very helpful to do the project alone, but I don’t think I would do it again. I like working with people and to have their opinions and insights at every step of the RCT experiment.”

When we asked him about what it is like to be a researcher and a PhD student, Stefan said “it is a continuous learning process, that allows you to meet and work with very interesting and very smart people . I can study questions that really interest me and that are important and relevant to the world. And there is flexibility in work hours, which allows me to also work at the World Bank”. However, Stefan stresses the importance of striking a balance between work and social life, which is the most challenging aspect for him.

Finally, Stefan left some advice to future PhD students: *“Try to gain some field and research experience related to development economics or your area of interest before applying to a PhD. You acquire tools to use later and create a network that will be helpful throughout the PhD”.*

Currently, Stefan is finishing his PhD. Regarding the future, when asked about it, Stefan said that he would like to keep investigating the intersection between development and environmental economics, exploring more climate issues and urban development.

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