Seasonal Scarcity and Sharing Norms*

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Abstract

Sharing provides one of few sources of insurance in poor communities. It gains prominence during adverse shocks, often largely aggregate, when it is also costliest for individuals to share. Yet it is little understood how scarcity affects individual willingness to share and willingness to enforce sharing from others, an important ingredient in sustaining prosocial behavior. This is what this paper examines. I conduct repeated within-subject lab-in-the-field experiments among Afghan subsistence farmers during a lean and a post-harvest season of relative plenty. These farmers experience seasonal scarcities annually. Using dictator and third party punishment games I separate individual sharing behavior from enforcement of sharing norms. While sharing exhibits high degree of temporal stability at both the aggregate, and, to a large extent, at the individual level, the enforcement of sharing norms is substantially weaker during the lean season. The findings suggest that the farmers are capable of sustaining mutual sharing through transitory periods of scarcity. It remains an open question whether exposure to unexpected shocks or prolonged periods of scarcity might result in breakdown of prosociality due to loosened sharing norms enforcement on a community level.

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