Summary

In September 2010 Mike Callen and James Long, two UCSD graduate students, working closely with two Afghan partners, found a way to use cellphone technology to reduce fraud in an Afghan election. Simply informing the polling station manager that they intended to photograph and transmit local vote counts to a central location reduced votes for the candidate most likely to be cheating by 25% (when compared to a control polling station in a randomized experiment). Around the world researchers are now looking for ways to replicate results such as these attempts to activate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) networks in order to confound corrupt practices.

The Evaluating Mobile Innovations for Security and Accountability (E-MISA) conference met on June 8-9 to take stock of those efforts and look for ways to move forward. Bringing together prominent researchers from six universities, NGOs and government policymakers, and socially-minded businessmen and women from across the globe, it was hosted by the UC Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation (IGCC) on the UCSD campus, and sponsored by the Minerva "Terrorism, Governance and Development" grant.

Zahir Khoja, Director of Mobile Money for Roshan, Afghanistan's leading cellular service provider, described efforts to use mobile money to reduce the cost of securing transfers of cash in his country, which is a serious impediment to internal trade. Mobile money remained a prominent topic throughout the conference. Discussions focused on the security and policy challenges to implementing mobile money in an insecure environment like Afghanistan, and on the various savings and electronic payment products that are possible once mobile money is available.

Lunch remarks were provided by Ahsan Iqbal, formerly Education Minister of Pakistan and currently the Deputy Secretary-General of the PML-N. He spoke about current and future projects to use mobile technology to improve the political accountability of local elected officials and to foster citizen political involvement. These remarks set the stage for a larger discussion about the use of mobile technology in areas where cell phone infrastructure and penetration may be much greater than traditional landline systems. Projects discussed included biometric payment systems for government welfare programs in India, the use of cell phones to monitor elections in Afghanistan.
and Uganda, programs using smartphones to better monitor low-level government officials in Pakistan, and the use cell phones to facilitate cash transfers directly from individuals in developed nations to poor families in Kenya.

The conference ended with a frank discussion of the challenges to policy implementation and of the tension between conducting rigorous causal inference and implementing policy in places where corruption and security issues are commonplace. The challenges that face those working on issues of security and accountability in developing countries are considerable. Yet the interdisciplinary and cross-national conversation yielded plenty of insights into how to approach those challenges. Current collaborations were strengthened and a few new possible projects have already sprung up as a result.