



## “WHEN WILL WE EVER LEARN?” CLOSING THE EVALUATION GAP FEEDBACK FROM CONSULTATIONS

---

### **Background**

How can we expand the knowledge base of “what works” in social development programs? Since 2004, Nancy Birdsall, Ruth Levine, Bill Savedoff and others at the Center for Global Development (CGD) have been asking this question of leaders, officials, and researchers from developing countries, bilateral agencies, development banks, NGOs and private foundations. We have found strong demand for strengthening the evidence base with rigorous studies in health, poverty reduction, education and other social sectors as a way to guide and improve social policy decisions.

Through this process, including the convening of an expert working group, we have analyzed the obstacles that constrain the realization of useful studies, their use by policymakers, and the existing range of initiatives aimed at increasing coordination, building evaluation capacity, and conducting studies. Gaps have been identified and several options for solutions have been formulated and critiqued through consultations with stakeholders.

### **Lessons from consultations**

*Demand relative to supply.* Through consultations with policymakers in developed and developing countries, we encountered broad agreement about the usefulness of high-quality impact evaluations, the relatively limited number of such studies, the negative consequences of a weak evidence base, and the desire to take action that would overcome the many disincentives, both political and economic, affecting individual institutions’ ability to undertake sufficient rigorous impact evaluations.

*Methodologies.* Individuals and groups consulted advised that the initiative should emphasize the generation of reliable and valid evidence, rather than focusing on particular methodologies, i.e. the most rigorous method available should be chosen, given the particular question being asked. It was agreed that random assignment, though an important method, is not the only rigorous method for impact evaluation.

*Capacity Development.* Individuals consulted, particularly those from developing countries, stressed that any international initiative should include a focus on developing capacity and stimulating demand to use evidence generated by impact evaluation.

*Strengthening Existing Initiatives.* Through consultations, we learned that some of the functions we saw as essential could be achieved through strengthening existing initiatives such as

- Strengthening evaluation systems within organizations, including monitoring, process and operational evaluations, and accountability reporting
- Increasing access to existing information through reviews, searchable databases, and policy pamphlets and newsletters
- Improving regular data collection by developing country governments and developing aggregate indicators
- Promoting specific evaluations with grants and other kinds of funding
- Conducting research and demonstrating good evaluation practices

In several of these areas, the DAC Network on Development Evaluation is playing an instrumental role.

*Collective Action.* We learned that there are some functions that are very unlikely to be undertaken by individual institutions, because of a variety of internal and external constraints. These include the provision of timely and flexible funds for evaluation design at the start of a program and independent quality facilitation and assurance. For these functions, we recommend a solution that involves a different type of collaboration across institutions, and with developing countries. While the funding and implementation options for a particular solution have yet to be determined, the following principles will guide the final recommendations the working group will present in its report.

### **Principles for action**

*Impact studies are beneficial.* Without impact studies, we cannot know if public resources are being used effectively to promote social development nor whether alternative programs might be more beneficial. Reviews have demonstrated that too few impact studies are being conducted with the requisite reliability and validity to provide the evidence base needed by policymakers in developing countries. Such impact evaluations are also essential to efforts to improve the effectiveness of international aid and improve accountability of government social spending.

*Knowledge is a public good.* Once impact studies are completed and disseminated, many countries can benefit by using their findings. This is particularly true if many impact studies of the same intervention are conducted in different contexts—a strategy requiring forethought and coordination. Hence, there is a larger collective demand for impact studies than from any single organization or country. Though they may recognize the value of impact studies, countries and organizations generally do not have incentives or capacity to invest sufficiently in the implementation of such studies relative to the global value of the information that would be generated.

*A collective initiative to promote impact studies is needed.* Collective action by multilateral agencies, bilateral agencies, private foundations, NGOs, and research centers is necessary to assure that sufficient investment in impact studies occurs; that findings are widely disseminated and data are made public; and that studies address questions of enduring importance and relevance to policymaking. These stakeholders should implement an initiative, with the appropriate institutional structure, to promote and finance reliable and valid impact studies that:

- address questions of enduring importance;
- provide models of good practice for emulation; and
- promote methodological innovation and high evaluation standards.

*The quality of impact studies is essential.* Any collective action to promote and finance impact studies should make the quality of those studies its top priority. This means endorsing and promoting methods that:

- reliably measure the impact that can be attributed to a specific program or policy;
- draw valid inferences from the evidence;
- are appropriate to the particular policy questions that are being asked; and
- are appropriate to the social, cultural, and political context.

The establishment of methodological standards, peer review processes, and wide dissemination of information about methods and data can be used to ensure quality.

*The initiative should be complementary, strategic, transparent and independent.* Organizations and governments are pursuing a wide range of activities to improve the evidence base, including conducting process and institutional evaluations; establishing evaluation standards; maintaining searchable databases; conducting meta-evaluations; coordinating and partnering in research, and introducing or improving impact evaluation work within specific institutions. The programs and studies promoted by this new initiative should *complement* and bring added value to existing activities by focusing on functions that require collective action. The initiative should promote the use of impact evaluations for select programs that are *strategically* important because of their potential scale, impact on important social problems, or potential contribution to knowledge about enduring questions in social development. The initiative should be *transparent* in all its activities – whether in the awarding of grants; setting standards; disseminating studies that meet quality standards regardless of their findings; or publishing financial information. Finally, the initiative has to have substantial *independence* from the agencies and organizations that it is involved in evaluating.

### **Next steps**

CGD will convene two more developing country consultations, in India and South Africa, to receive further feedback on the Evaluation Gap initiative and to raise awareness about the working group's recommendations. The working group is in the process of finalizing its report to incorporate feedback received during the consultations. The final report will be launched in mid-May in Washington, DC.

**The following individuals were interviewed or provided comments to the Evaluation Gap Working Group:**

- Catherine Cameron, Consultant, DFID & Agulhas, Inc.
- Max Pulgar-Vidal, Special Advisor, Office of Development Effectiveness, IDB
- Mayra Buvinic, Division Chief, Social Program Division, IDB
- Inder Ruprah, Senior Economist, Office of Evaluation, IDB
- Eduardo Lora, Senior Economist, Research Department, IDB
- Charles Griffin, World Bank
- Gregory Ingram, Director, Office of Evaluation & Development, World Bank
- Charles Sherman, National Institute of Health (NIH)
- Carol Peasely, Counsellor, USAID
- Carol Lancaster, Prof. GWU (formerly with USAID)
- Patrick Kelley, Director, IOM Board on Global Health
- Eduardo Gonzalez Pier, Ministry of Health, Mexico
- Jeremy Hurst, OECD
- Julio Frenk, Minister of Health, Mexico
- Stephano Bertozzi, Berkeley & Institute of Public Health (Mexico)
- Ricardo Hausman, Professor, Kennedy School
- Tom Bossert, Professor, HSPH
- Rachel Glennerster, Director, Poverty Action Lab, MIT
- Abhijit Banerjee, Professor, Poverty Action Lab, MIT
- Bernhard Schwartlander, GFATM
- Richard Feachem, GFATM
- Elizabeth Docteur, OECD
- Daniel Klagerman, Ministry of Economy, France
- Hans Lundgren, DAC
- Paul Delay, UNAIDS
- Ties Boerma, WHO (and Health Metrics)
- Jim Heiby & Karen Cavanaugh, USAID
- Calestous Juma, Harvard
- Rob D. van den Berg, Global Environment Facility
- Michael Schroll, WHO
- Binh Nguyen, Asian Development Bank
- Ariel Fiszbein, World Bank
- Coralie Gevers, World Bank
- Owen Barder, Center for Global Development
- Neils Dabelstein, DANIDA
- Paul Brest, Hewlett Foundation
- Tamara Fox, Hewlett Foundation
- Linda Frey, Hewlett Foundation
- Sarah Macfarlane, University of California San Francisco
- Carol Medlin, University of California San Francisco
- John Wallace, MDRC
- Doug Owens, Stanford University
- Kristi Kimball, Hewlett Foundation
- Andrew Warner, Millennium Challenge Corporation
- Dan Levy, Harvard University

- Delia Welsh, Millennium Challenge Corporation
- Jon Baron, Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy
- Laura Rawlings, World Bank
- Martha Ainsworth, World Bank
- Paul Clements, University of Michigan
- Amy Coen, Population Action International
- Jim Rugh, CARE
- Mihira Karra, US Agency for International Development
- Barbara Wynn, RAND Institute
- Sally Ethelston, Population Action International
- Ray Struyk, Urban Institute
- Jean Duff, National Cathedral
- Joe Eichenberger, Asian Development Bank
- Charles Teller, USAID
- Janet Kerley, USAID
- Grant Morrill, USAID
- Bob Berg, United Nations Association, USA
- James Riccio, MDRC
- David Bonbright, Keystone
- Jodi Nelson, International Rescue Committee
- Emily Pelton, Independent Consultant
- Brian Trelstad, Acumen Fund
- Jere Behrman, University of Pennsylvania
- Cynthia Clapp-Wincek, U.S. Department of State
- Orazio Attanasio, Institute for Fiscal Studies
- Marc Mitchell, Harvard School of Public Health
- Geoff Barnard, University of Sussex
- Nilmini Rubin, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
- Sarah Zalud, Brookings Institution
- Lew Miller, Wentz/Miller & Associates, Global CME Newsletter
- Howard Rolston, US Department of Health and Human Services
- Bob Boruch, University of Pennsylvania
- Robert N. Kaplan, Inter-American Development Bank
- Ann Van Dusen, Washington Area Women's Foundation
- Gonzalo Hernandez, Ministry of Social Development, Mexico
- Rodrigo Parot, IDB
- David Goldsbrough, IMF
- Lant Pritchett, World Bank
- Krista L. Jacobs, University of California, Davis
- Paul Isenman, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- Eduardo Lora, IDB
- D. Rich, S. Rhee, J. Albert and K. Donaldson, Aquaya
- Arnab Acharya, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
- Esther Forgan, Department for International Development
- Birger Forsberg, Karolinska Institutet, Sweden
- Andy Haines, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
- Geeta.Kingdon, University of Oxford
- Mylene Lagarde, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

- Anne Mills, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
- Nicolas Meisel, Agence Française de Développement
- Jean-Paul Moatti, University of the Mediterranean, Aix-Marseille
- Andy Oxman, University of Oslo
- Natasha Palmer, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
- Rosemary Preston, University of Warwick
- David Ross, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
- Andrea Wang, University of Oxford
- Alan Pearson, The Joanna Briggs Institute
- Geoffrey Gurd, Public Health Agency of Canada
- Gokul Mandayam, School of Social Work, USC
- Haluk Soydan, School of Social Work, USC
- Marilyn Sheldon Flynn, School of Social Work, USC
- Dorothy deMoya, Campbell Collaboration
- Robert Boruch, University of Pennsylvania
- Daniel Clay, University of Iowa
- Joan Zlotnik, Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research
- Lynn McDonald, University of Toronto
- Karin Hannes, Belgian Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine
- Jeffrey Searle, University of Durham
- Phil Davies, Government Social Research Unit, UK
- Diane Gagnon, Canadian Health Services Research Foundation
- Anisya Thomas, Fritz Institute

**The Evaluation Gap Working Group process and findings were discussed at the following meetings:**

Health Metrics Network. Meeting at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD. May, 2004.

VII Meetings of the LACEA / IADB / WB Research Network on Inequality and Poverty. San Jose, Costa Rica. November 3, 2004.

World Health Organization. Staff involved in GAVI and Health Metrics Network. Nov. 9, 2004. Geneva, Switzerland.

Global Fund for Aids TB and Malaria. Nov. 8, 2004. Geneva, Switzerland.

Development Assistance Committee Evaluation Network. Nov. 10, 2004. Paris.

2ème conférence AFD / EUDN. « Aide au développement: Pourquoi et Comment. Quelles stratégies pour quelle efficacité? » Nov. 25, 2004.

What's Next for the World Bank. Symposium convened by the Center for Global Development. Washington, DC. September 23, 2005.

The Sixth International Campbell Collaboration Colloquium. Los Angeles, CA. February 22-24, 2006.

DAC Evaluation Network Meeting. OECD Headquarters, Paris. March 30-31, 2006.

**CGD convened meetings to discuss the consultation draft at the following:**

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. July 25, 2005. Menlo Park, CA.

Center for Global Development. August 1, 2005. Washington, DC

SEDESOL (Ministry of Social Development, Mexico). February 9-10, 2006. Mexico City, Mexico.

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. March 6, 2006. London, UK.