



Immediate Release

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Donors Back Impact Evaluation of Programs in Developing Countries: New Initiative to Support Independent Studies to Determine What Works

Bellagio, Italy, June 8, 2006: A new effort to build solid evidence about the effectiveness of programs in low- and middle-income countries was launched by leaders from major international organizations, bilateral donors, private foundations, and developing countries who met in Bellagio, Italy this week.

Private foundations and donors committed financial support to work with developing countries to develop proposals for an independent evaluation facility with a strong developing country focus to promote evidence-based policymaking, including of programs supported by international aid, with an aim to produce a step-change in rigorous studies to determine what makes a difference.

The initiative is a response to a gaping lack of knowledge about which social development programs are effective. In 2005, donor countries committed US\$34 billion to aid projects addressing health, education and poverty in the developing world. Developing countries themselves spent hundreds of billions more on similar programs. Yet surprisingly few studies rigorously measure the impact of this spending.

Participants in the meeting agreed that a new entity should be established to channel funds to high-quality, independent impact evaluations around key questions that confront policymakers in both donor agencies and developing country governments: These include, for example, evaluations of alternative approaches to increase the use of basic health services by the poor; to improve learning outcomes in low-income countries; to provide microcredit effectively, and others. Such evaluations would be done across multiple countries, to build a strong body of evidence from which generalized conclusions can be drawn. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and bilateral agencies from the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Canada and Australia all expressed interest in being involved in such an effort.

Ruth Levine, director of programs and senior fellow at CGD, and a co-author of the report, said that meeting participants recognized that “rigorous impact evaluations happen when technical experts work closely with policymakers and program funders at an early stage. This collaboration assures that policymakers care about the questions that are being asked and use the answers when the study is done.”

“Without impact evaluations that are rigorous, independent, and thus credible we cannot know what programs work. We cannot even argue convincingly that foreign aid itself works,” said Nancy Birdsall, CGD President. According to Birdsall, “By committing to do more impact evaluations, the organizations are joining together to learn—including learning about apparently good programs in health, education, microfinance that might otherwise be scrapped for lack of evidence that they work.”

Participants at the Bellagio meeting reviewed a newly released CGD working group report, *When Will We Ever Learn? Improving Lives through Impact Evaluation*, which documented the limited evidence base for decision making. “The report reveals how little we really know about the effects of some very popular programs – HIV prevention, keeping girls in school, or community-based health insurance,” said Levine.

Dozens of prominent development practitioners, analysts, and officials have signed a statement of principles based on the group’s report urging the creation of an independent entity to foster more and better impact evaluations.

“Policy makers, researchers and program managers all know intimately how the lack of sound evidence about what works undermines program design and implementation, wasting resources and denying potential beneficiaries services that could have enabled them to improve their lives,” said Bill Savedoff, a senior partner at Social Insight, an independent international consulting firm and co-author of the report. “Many in the development community agree that the time has come to fix this problem.”

Support for the initiative is driven, in part, by a broader global trend of increasing accountability in the public sector. According to Richard Manning, Chair of the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC), “developing country governments and aid agencies are increasingly focused on the need for transparency and accountability for several years now. They are working to implement results-based management and to link evidence to policy. But those efforts need to be complemented by rigorous studies that can show how specific types of programs are faring.”

Although individual countries and agencies conduct a handful of impact evaluations each year, participants in the meeting agreed that the problem cannot be fully resolved without collective action. The pressures on individual organizations to spend their funds on programs instead of research are very large, and subtle pressures can lead to biased or even suppressed studies. “In public, agencies have to say they are doing a good job at all kinds of evaluation, but in private they admit that the impact evaluation work is inadequate,” Birdsall said. “That is why a collective agreement is needed to fund something independent and external,” she said.

Developing country governments, which have sometimes taken the lead in impact evaluation work, will be full partners in the initiative, Birdsall said.

“We anticipate that several developing countries will commit funds and staff to the initiative. Ultimately, they know which questions need to be researched and it is their people who will benefit from the knowledge generated by these studies,” she said.

Reverend Njongonkulu Ndungane, the Archbishop of Cape Town said, “On principle, African governments, institutions, and researchers recognize that impact evaluations are crucial for Africa’s Development. In planning a way forward we need to consider Africa’s development context and implement a gradual and progressive approach. Also important will be the full participation of developing countries in the formation of the Evaluation Gap Initiative.”

The private sector also has a stake, according to Vidhya Muthuram of the Institute for Financial Management and Research in Chennai, India. Muthuram said, "The benefits of building a strong body of evidence about what it takes for social programs to succeed is valuable to both developing country governments, and to private organizations that are seeking to make a positive difference. Particularly for the private sector, the enthusiasm for investing in social sectors will wane if we cannot demonstrate an impact and show that we are learning from experience."

Eduardo Amadeo, former Minister of Social Development in Argentina, added that international collaboration is necessary for the initiative’s success. “The data bases and surveys financed by the Inter-American Development Bank helped us to implement and manage the emergency social programs during the 2002 crisis. This can set an example for other governments of how investing in rigorous evidence can critically inform the management of social funds.”

CGD began the Evaluation Gap initiative in 2004, partly in response to weaknesses discovered in preparing the book *Millions Saved: Success in Global Public Health*, Levine said. “We set some basic criteria for defining a successful public health program before we would include it in the book and studied 56 highly regarded programs around the world. But when it came time to document their impacts, we had to drop 27 of them for lack of information. That was a real wakeup call. Something is wrong when after billions of dollars of investment in hundreds of programs we can only find 17 proven successes.”

The Bellagio meeting was convened by CGD, an independent, non-partisan and not-for-profit Washington think tank, and hosted by the Rockefeller Foundation. The CGD initiative involved 20 leading experts and officials in the Evaluation Gap Working Group, which released its findings on May 31st in Washington, DC.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation have supported the initiative from its beginning. Dan Kress, Senior Health Economist at the Gates Foundation, said his organization is eager to see more rigorous impact evaluations being conducted. “It is frustrating for us to have funds ready to put into proven programs, and then find that the proof just isn’t there,” he said.

Smita Singh, Director of the Global Development Program at the Hewlett Foundation, agrees. “A set of basic investments in impact assessments are needed so that we can make sure that not only development assistance and philanthropic funds but also the much larger pools of public funds developing countries invest in social programs actually make a difference in people’s lives.”

Though good impact evaluations are relatively rare, participants in the Bellagio meeting had an opportunity to discuss successful studies—and learn how they had improved policy.

Mexico conducted rigorous studies of a large national program that pays a monthly stipend to poor mothers if they keep their children in school. “By doing a rigorous evaluation, we were able to show that the cash payments improved children’s health and schooling. Without that evidence, it would have been hard to justify continuing to spend money on a program that is now spending almost 1% of national income each year,” said Santiago Levy, former General Director of the Mexican Social Security Institute and one of the program’s founders.

Participants also heard about a rigorous study in India that involved collaboration between researchers at MIT and an NGO called Seva Mandir. The evaluation showed Seva Mandir that adding a second teacher to its schools had little or no impact on schooling, so they were able to allocate their limited funds to other more promising approaches. Another evaluation, discussed at the meeting, showed that mass de-worming of students in Kenyan schools reduced absenteeism and improved learning.

The meeting took place June 6- 9 and was attended by: Eduardo Amadeo, former Minister, Argentine Ministry of Social Development; Nancy Birdsall, President, Center for Global Development; Jan Cedergren, Ambassador, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Lola Dare, Executive Secretary, African Council for Sustainable Health Development; Jocelyne Delarue, Evaluation Officer, French Development Agency; John Hicklin, Deputy Director, Independent Evaluation Office, International Monetary Fund; Gilbert Hounbo, Assistant Administrator, United Nations Development Program; Daniel Kress, Senior Program Officer, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; David Levine, Professor, Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley; Ruth Levine, Director of Programs and Senior Fellow, Center for Global Development; Richard Manning, Chair of the Development Assistance Committee, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; Namhla Mniki, Program Manager, African Monitor; Vidhya Muthuram, Coordinator, Institute of Financial Management and Research; Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, Founder, African Monitor; Francesca Pissarides, Senior Economist, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; William D. Savedoff, Senior Partner, Social Insight; Goberdhan Singh, Director, Evaluation Division, Canadian International Development Agency; Smita Singh, Director, Global Development, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; Graham Stegmann, Senior Advisor to the President, African Development Bank; Mark Stoleson, President, Sovereign Global; Brian Trelstad, Chief Investment Officer, Acumen Fund; Peter Versegi, Assistant Director General, Australian Government Overseas Aid Program; Rob Visser, Chief Scientist, Director-General for International Cooperation, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Nicholas York, Head of Evaluation, Department for International Development, United Kingdom.

Further information and the full report of the Evaluation Gap Working Group are available online at http://www.cgdev.org/section/initiatives/_active/evalgap

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