

Improving Social Development through Impact Evaluation

A consultation chaired by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and the Center for Global Development (CGD)

6 March 2006, London

Objectives

This meeting on impact evaluation of social development programs was convened to review the CGD Consultation Draft, to consider the value and character of the Evaluation Gap initiative, and to solicit ideas to make a more workable and feasible proposal from a range of European researchers and policymakers.

Participants

Arnab Acharya, Sr. Lecturer; Dept. of Public Health and Policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
Birger Forsberg, Lecturer, Division of International Health, Karolinska Institutet, Sweden
Andy Haines, Director, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
Geeta Kingdon, Education Economist, University of Oxford
Mylene Lagarde, Research Fellow, Health Economics and Financing Program, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
Anne Mills, Professor of Health Economics and Policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
Nicolas Meisel, Economist, Agence Française de Développement
Jean-Paul Moatti, Health Economist, University of the Mediterranean, Aix-Marseille
Andy Oxman, Researcher, Norwegian Knowledge Centre for the Health Services
Natasha Palmer, Lecturer in Health Economics, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
Rosemary Preston, Professor, School of Health and Social Studies, University of Warwick
David Ross, Reader in Epidemiology & International Public Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
William D. Savedoff, Independent Consultant, Center for Global Development
Andrea Wang, Degree candidate, Global Health Governance, Oxford University

Meeting Notes

Andy Haines opened the meeting by highlighting the need for more impact evaluation and welcoming the opportunity to collaborate on an initiative to fill this gap. William D. Savedoff thanked LSHTM for hosting the meeting and the participants for giving their time. He introduced the initiative and discussed the main problems identified by the CGD-led process and characteristics of a solution as identified by the Evaluation Gap Working Group.

David Ross made a presentation that reflected ways in which context affects research in developing and developed countries; different schools of thought on evaluation; and ethical issues related to doing such research. He emphasized the importance of considering the characteristics that influence

the standards of evidence required for policymaking. And some of the political challenges of doing good impact evaluation.

Nicolas Meisel presented AFD's experience in introducing impact evaluation in its research department. He discussed the context and constraints to contracting impact evaluations with independent research institutions; described their first impact evaluation on micro-credit programs in Morocco; and reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of their randomised sample approach. He emphasized the importance of good quality partnerships between AFD, research institutions and local implementers and of negotiating the research design with the project implementers.

In the discussions that followed, key points raised by participants include the following:

Key role for developing countries

Participants emphasized the importance of consulting with developing country officials, researchers, and civil society organizations and finding ways to make sure that they play a central role in expressing demand, identifying questions, engaging policymakers, and building their capacity and evaluation culture. Developing countries should not be seen as monolithic entities – distinguishing roles to be played by different actors within those countries and distinguishing the capacities and needs of countries with middle and lower incomes, with stronger and weaker research capacities. If developing country governments were to make financial commitments to the initiative, they would have a different relationship to it, giving it greater legitimacy.

Capacity Building

Participants gave great emphasis to the need for capacity building in developing countries. Beyond the consultation draft's recommendation to encourage collaboration between international and domestic research centers, they noted that paying for local researchers' time can crowd out other activities unless it is accompanied by efforts to expand local supply of research services. Examples of successful policies to increase the number and quality of researchers were noted, including those of Scandinavian aid programs and doctoral students from Vietnam. The value of increasing local research capacity extends beyond the quality of the research to include increasing the likelihood of affecting subsequent policy decisions since international research institutions can only provide sporadic attention to issues, while local institutions can provide sustained attention to policy questions in the domestic policy debates.

Disincentives and Opportunism

Participants described a large number of disincentives to producing impact evaluations and the existence of substantial resistance, particularly among politicians, to rigorous independent evaluation. Nevertheless, they also noted cases where high level officials are knowledgeable and committed to impact evaluation. If an international initiative could be structured to recognize and seize opportunities when they arise, it could be an effective catalyst to promoting impact evaluation.

Character of solution

Participants raised a number of issues regarding the characteristics of any solution:

- it should be explicitly linked to demand for impact evaluations by policymakers and actively promote such demand;
- it might be better to begin with a first stage aimed at coordinating and information functions, leaving funding windows to a later stage;

- emphasize the value of the initiative as a clearinghouse for identifying enduring questions, linking policymakers and researchers, promoting systematic reviews to identify gaps in knowledge, etc.;
- explicitly consider the free-rider problem; some agencies are already doing impact evaluation, so why should they join unless it commits others to also contribute to the joint effort at knowledge creation?
- Strengthen attention to the role the initiative could play in building local capacity or reinforcing other initiatives to build local capacity.
- Overcoming demand limitations would be essential, particularly on the part of resistant states.
- Concerns were expressed to avoid imposing another layer of informational demands on staff working in aid agencies and local governments.
- Current aid funding is likely to be inefficient without impact evaluation research, so that devoting a small share of foreign aid and national expenditures to research is likely to yield large benefits.
- New methods and measures need to be developed if we're going to get answers to policy questions despite the difficulties posed by complex social processes and time delays between program activities and impacts.

Suggestions to improve presentation and be more persuasive

Participants discussed ways to improve the presentation of the consultation draft's arguments. Limitations of semantics were raised – using the term “evaluation” can lead to confusion when the same term is used for collecting management data; on the other hand, it makes it possible to take advantage of cultural norms regarding the importance of incorporating evaluation in public programs. They also suggested the paper should be more comprehensive in listing complementary initiatives and showing how the proposal will fit within that broader context.

Participants noted the initiative could benefit by considering the lessons from other international experiences. For example, the CGIAR model has been held up as a model for emulation for decades but without success; hence it may not be wise to give it emphasis. As another example, the evaluation culture in the medical field was changed dramatically by showing the degree of uncertainty regarding interventions and the real possibility of doing harm; perhaps the paper would be more convincing if it highlighted such cases.

Justifications to do something would be strengthened if the recommendations were set against the actual cost of a true comprehensive program (hundreds of millions of dollars?). The paper could also do a better job of explaining the reasons for the particular form proposed for the initiative.