

A Look Back at Two Decades of Progress in the Impact Evaluation Landscape

The Working Group on New Evidence Tools for Policy Impact

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1971 RAND's Health Insurance Experiment begins

The RAND Health Insurance Experiment was a 15-year effort funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services on how cost sharing arrangements affect people's use of health services, the quality of care they receive, and their health status. It is the largest health policy study in US history and paved the way for increased cost sharing for medical care in the 1980s and 1990s.

1990–2000 The results agenda takes the stage

The “evidence revolution”—as described by Howard White (2019)—arose as part of New Public Management, which took hold in the 1990s and held government agencies to account for their performance by monitoring trends in high-level outcomes like unemployment and poverty. Examples include the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act in the US and the 1999 Modernizing Government White Paper in the UK. Prior to this period, performance was predominantly assessed by inputs, such as how much money was spent.

1997 PROGRESA kicks off more impact evaluations in development

PROGRESA, a conditional cash transfer program in Mexico, was the first large-scale social policy evaluation implemented in a lower-income country to use a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design. The impact evaluation was designed specifically to inform upcoming policy decisions about whether and how to adapt, expand, and improve PROGRESA across the country. PROGRESA was the first of a series of cash transfer and other social protection programs in Latin America, South Africa, and Asia to be rigorously evaluated, demonstrating the feasibility of evaluating and improving at-scale programs.

2002–2012 Dozens of new evaluation organizations are founded, helping create the evidence-based policymaking field

The number, scope, and funding of evaluation and research partnership organizations grows tremendously. This includes Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), the World Bank's Development Impact Evaluation (DIME) group (see next milestone), IDinsight, and the Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA). Prior to this period, there was little academic-level rigor in the evaluation of development interventions. Instead, the focus was on output-level performance measures.

2005–2014 Growth of World Bank trust funds for impact evaluation

The World Bank establishes new multidonor trust funds dedicated to knowledge generation and use through impact evaluation, including DIME (which was created in 2005 and received renewed funding

from the Impact Evaluation to Development fund in 2014), the Health Results Innovation Trust Fund in 2007, and the Strategic Impact Evaluation Fund in 2012.

2005–2015 Proliferation of government-embedded evidence entities

Impact evaluation “labs” are embedded in government agencies to test policy reforms and enhance their effectiveness. The establishment of these entities is often due to legislative interest and demand. Examples include CONEVAL in Mexico (prompted by PROGRESA); the Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation in South Africa; MineduLAB in Peru; the Government Evaluation Facility in Uganda; and the Behavioral Economics Team of Australia (BETA). In the health sector, entities like Thailand's Health Intervention and Technology Assessment Program (HITAP) were created to develop local evidence on cost-effectiveness of health products and services.

2006 Release of CGD's Evaluation Gap Working Group report: *When Will We Ever Learn?*

CGD publishes the report *When Will We Ever Learn?: Improving Lives Through Impact Evaluation*, highlighting that very few social programs benefit from studies that could determine whether or not they actually make a difference. The report proposed the design of the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) and generated support for its creation.

2008 International Initiative for Impact Evaluation established

3ie is founded with technical support from CGD to finance, broker, disseminate, and facilitate use of impact evaluations in collaboration with donors and country governments.

2009–2011 Launch of US agency evaluation policies

Marking a major step forward for impact evaluations of aid programs, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) developed formal agency-wide evaluation policies in 2009 and 2011, respectively.

2010–2020 New wave of evidence-to-policy organizations

New “knowledge broker” organizations are established to translate evidence into policy and practice. Many have greater proximity to local contexts, an interest in capacity strengthening and demand generation, and a focus on ensuring that research questions align with government decision-making needs. Examples include the African Institute for Development Policy, East Africa Social Science Translation Collaborative, Africa Evidence Network, Knowledge Sector Initiative, Evidence Action, and the Network of Impact Evaluation Researchers in Africa, among others.

2010–present

Rise of evidence synthesis products

Following the rise in the number of impact evaluations, more synthesis products such as systematic reviews are produced in specific policy areas. Some efforts are directly linked to the Campbell Collaboration, an international research network that promotes the production and use of high-quality systematic reviews. The need to create more accessible evidence synthesis products with implications for policy has also been recognized in recent years, as shown by the Metaketa Initiative, MCC's evaluation briefs, and evidence gap maps like those from 3ie, among many other examples (though many products are not publicly available). Their use is further facilitated by "knowledge broker" organizations that help link evidence to policy and practice (see previous milestone).

2010–present

New impact investment and prize funds established

Starting with Development Innovation Ventures (DIV), based at USAID, impact investment and prize funds for innovations in development based on rigorous impact measurement continued to sprout over the last decade. Examples include the Global Innovation Fund, the Agency Fund, and the Fund for Innovation in Development.

2013

What Works movement picks up in the UK and the US

The UK creates the What Works Network with nine centers, each focused on a different policy area, using a program of impact evaluation and systematic review to better inform the design and delivery of public services at home and abroad. In the US, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) synthesizes and distributes knowledge products on education interventions.

2014

First Development Impact Bond launched

Development Impact Bonds (DIBs) finance development programs with money from private investors who earn a return paid by a third-party donor if the program is successful. The outcomes to be measured are agreed upon at the outset and independently verified. A working group jointly led by CGD and Social Finance UK was instrumental in the design, marketing, and adoption of DIBs. The first DIB in education—a partnership between UBS Optimus Foundation, Children's Investment Fund Foundation, Educate Girls, Instiglio, and IDinsight—improved girls' education outcomes in Rajasthan, India.

2016

Publication of the third edition of *Millions Saved: New Cases of Proven Success in Global Health*

Millions Saved is a collection of success stories of large-scale efforts to improve global health. The 2016 edition of the book by Amanda Glassman and Miriam Temin follows on two previous versions published in 2004 and 2007 by Ruth Levine. The three editions showcase more than 30 rigorously evaluated case studies of successful interventions, upending conventional pessimism about public health challenges and drawing broad lessons about what works in global health. *Millions Saved* is a key resource for health policy decision makers, implementers and students worldwide

2018–present

Rise of effective altruism

The rise of "effective altruism" serves as an animating motivation for a new generation of philanthropists, embodied by GiveWell and Open Philanthropy, dedicated to using high-quality evidence to determine how to help others as much as possible. They seek to base recommendations and contributions on the empirically observed cost-effectiveness of different interventions. NGOs like GiveDirectly and New Incentives make use of RCTs to become eligible for funding.

2019

Evidence Act approved in the US

In the United States, the January 2019 bipartisan passage and approval of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act (H.R.4174) promotes data accessibility, responsible data use, and government evidence generation and use for more effective programs. This involves installing chief evaluation officers in every agency, establishing agency-wide learning agendas, and discrete resourcing for evidence generation and use.

2019

Nobel Prize awarded for use of experimental evaluation in development economics

Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, and Michael Kremer win the Nobel Prize in Economics for their experimental approach to alleviating global poverty.

2019

OECD DAC Network on Development Evaluation adopts new evaluation criteria

The OECD DAC Network on Development Evaluation (EvalNet) publishes six evaluation criteria (relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability), two principles for their use, and guidance to support contextualized application of the criteria, with the aim of helping achieve the Sustainable Development Goals as set out in Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement.

2020

Global Evaluation Initiative launched

The Global Evaluation Initiative (GEI) launches with the aim of building country-owned monitoring and evaluation frameworks and evaluation capacities. GEI is supported by a multidonor trust fund managed by the Independent Evaluation Group of the World Bank.

2022 goal

Breakthrough in policy use of impact evaluation funding and practice

CGD launches the final report of its Working Group on New Evidence Tools for Policy Impact, which highlights how far the impact evaluation and broader evidence field has come and proposes a renewed funding agenda for greater value from evidence in public policymaking. The development community elevates the importance of shifting agenda-setting power and resources to those who best understand, and can respond to, decision making needs in different contexts.

2030 vision

Investments transform impact evaluation and evidence use for shared prosperity

Development funders take collective action to unlock the potential of impact evaluation as a powerful tool for better social and economic outcomes, including through support for long-term partnerships for demand generation and decision responsiveness, and investments in data and evidence use systems. In light of these real-world benefits, government policymakers routinely invest in evidence generation and use. Leaders across governments and development institutions commit to institutionalizing evidence production and uptake to improve decision making for improved lives.

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