

Learning from Development: the Case for an International Council to Catalyze Independent Impact Evaluations of Social Sector Interventions

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To achieve real improvements in health, education, and welfare in the developing world, social programs have to work. For decades, development agencies have disbursed billions of dollars for programs aimed at improving living conditions and reducing poverty; developing countries themselves have spent hundreds of billions more. Yet the shocking fact is that we have relatively little knowledge about the net impact of most of these programs. In the absence of good evidence about what works, political influences dominate, and decisions about the level and type of spending are hard to challenge. Without question, the results are suboptimal. But if evidence about what works were systematically developed and made public, that information could be used for better public policymaking and thus for more effective international aid and domestic spending.

Fortunately, every day brings opportunities to learn from social programs in developing countries, and when we seize these opportunities, the benefits from the resulting knowledge can be large and global. For example, rigorous studies of conditional cash transfer programs, job training, and nutrition interventions in a few countries have encouraged such programs to be launched in many other places, guided policymakers to adopt more effective approaches, and protected large-scale programs from unjustified cuts. By contrast, a dearth of rigorous studies on teacher training, retention of students, health financing approaches, micro-credit programs, and methods for effectively conveying public health messages leave decision makers in these areas to work with the best intentions, many good ideas, but virtually no sound evidence about how to effectively spend resources to reach worthy goals.

**An evaluation gap exists
because there are too few
incentives to conduct good
impact evaluations and
too many obstacles**

Slowly, governments, international agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are taking piecemeal initiatives to improve the evidence base in social development policy, but there is still insufficient investment relative to the demand. The demand for knowledge is real. Governments and agencies regularly seek new ideas for addressing long-standing problems such as how poor children can be given a better chance to complete secondary school or how married couples can be encouraged to undergo HIV testing. But decision makers want answers within time frames and budgets that do not allow development of rigorous evidence. Time and again, programs are designed based on a patchwork of rushed studies that are methodologically weak and may lead to incorrect conclusions. Moreover, incentives are sorely lacking for carrying out these rigorous studies, which fall outside the normal budget and planning cycles.

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The solution to this problem is twofold: Enhance existing efforts, and create a new approach that directly addresses the lack of incentives to undertake impact evaluations. Governments and agencies need to be encouraged to (1) strengthen existing initiatives to conduct impact evaluations, (2) build and share rigorous evidence, (3) synthesize studies, (4) build research capacity in developing countries, and (5) link researchers, policymakers, and project managers in an effective system for generating and using information. However, this knowledge is a “public good,”¹ so governments and agencies on their own will continue to under-invest in impact evaluation unless there is some form of collective agreement. That collective agreement could mobilize adequate funds for impact studies by coordinating commitments. The value of any individual institution’s activities or studies would be multiplied many times within a collective arrangement because such an agreement would:

- cluster studies around priority issues;
- ensure that studies are reliable and valid;
- create a register of on-going studies, which would offer both a means to widely disseminate results and a clearinghouse of data for reanalysis; and
- build capacity in developing countries to undertake and communicate about research.

This type of collective arrangement could be formed by creating a small council dedicated to promoting impact evaluations and having the capacity to conduct grant reviews, help coordinate projects, and provide catalytic funding to get evaluations started. Far from duplicating existing initiatives and networks, the council would fill a critical gap in the current portfolio of evaluation efforts.

This Brief outlines the problems that inhibit learning in social development programs, describes the characteristics of a collective international solution, and shows how the international community can accelerate progress by learning what works in social policy. It draws heavily on the work of the Evaluation Gap Working Group of the Center for Global Development and a year-long process of consultation with policymakers, social program managers, and evaluation experts from around the world.

How to Measure What Works

To determine what works in a social development program, it is necessary to collect data to estimate what would have happened without the program. Well-established guidance is available on the best approaches to choose. By examining how people in a particular program fared *vis-à-vis* an appropriate comparison group, it is possible to measure the

impact that can be *attributed* to the specific program. And it is only this impact that truly measures a program’s effect.

Studies that measure impact well can yield both welcome and unwelcome surprises. For example, a program to help disadvantaged teens keep up their reading skills over summer vacation found that they *lost* half a grade in reading ability, but a careful comparison showed that without the program, these teens would have lost a full grade of reading ability (Grossman 1994). In Mexico, people who resisted the creation of a conditional cash transfer program claimed that it would increase spousal abuse, but careful studies while the program was being gradually extended across the country showed that this did not happen (Levy 2006). On the other hand, a program aimed at reducing criminal acts among youths by taking them to see conditions in prisons had widespread political support, but rigorous studies found that youths who participated were actually at *higher* risk of engaging in criminal behavior than those who didn’t (Petrosino et al 2000). The simple truth is that many well-intentioned social programs are like promising medical treatments—we can’t really know if they do more good than harm until they are tested.

Commonly heard objections to impact studies—that they are unethical, costly, can’t be generalized, or don’t provide timely information for decision making—are directly contradicted by experience. An Indian NGO measured the impact on learning of introducing teachers’ assistants and found that the strategy did not improve attendance or performance. So the NGO shifted its resources to more promising approaches (Banerjee et al 2003). The Mexican government measured the impact of requiring school attendance for children whose families received cash payments and, by demonstrating the program’s success, were able to preserve it through a major change in the country’s political regime. An NGO measured the impact on school attendance of a deworming program in Africa, and the results were used to successfully adapt and implement the program in India.

Despite their high value, impact studies are relatively rare. When managers or policymakers seek reliable evidence, they are usually disappointed because reviews regularly find that the quality of evidence is weak. For example:

- An ILO review of 127 community health insurance studies found that only two of them investigated whether membership increased health service utilization with sufficient rigor to draw reliable conclusions. After decades of programs and hundreds of millions of dollars, the claim that such programs are worthwhile because they will improve health service access remains weak.
- CGD’s “What Works” Working Group reviewed 56 public health interventions that leading experts named as

examples of major successes. Of these, 27 were excluded from the group's final report, *Millions Saved*, because the impact of the public health interventions *could not be documented* (Levine et al 2004).

- A systematic review of 456 UNICEF reports found that only 44 were impact evaluations. The review estimated that 15 percent of all UNICEF reports included impact assessments, but noted that "many evaluations were unable to properly assess impact because of methodological shortcomings" (Victora 1995).

Why Don't We Have More Impact Studies?

Governments and international agencies are responsible for designing, executing, monitoring, assessing, and reporting on programs. By and large, these activities are ongoing, must be conducted in-house to promote institutional learning, can be undertaken within standard budget and planning cycles, and are subjected to regular review and improvement (Jacquet 2006).

But impact studies are different. For most organizations, they are not routinely done but instead are applied strategically to

The fact that knowledge about the impact of social programs is a public good means that collective actions are most likely to succeed in generating sufficient investment

programs from which important knowledge can be gained. Impact evaluations do not have to be conducted in-house; in fact, their integrity, credibility, and quality are usually enhanced if they are external, independent, and undertaken by specialists in impact evaluation. They must be initiated when the right combination of factors arise, namely, an important policy question, the opportunity to integrate impact evaluation into a new or expanding program, and the active interest and collaboration of policymakers, funders, researchers, project managers, and beneficiaries. Typically, these factors coincide outside of normal budget and planning cycles.

Moreover, there are real disincentives for carrying out impact evaluations, including bureaucratic constraints. At all levels in organizations, managers who are concerned about potential budgets cuts or loss of prestige in the event of negative findings may set up obstacles to impact evaluations. Staff may be rewarded for focusing on rapid start-up and implementation rather than taking the time to conduct baseline studies and devote

time and money to evaluation. Politicians who use social programs to gain electoral advantage may see little value in evidence about how effective the spending is in achieving long-term social goals.

The Demand for Reliable Evidence Is Growing

Despite these obstacles, nascent efforts to address the problem demonstrate the demand for reliable evidence. For example, in 2001, Mexico passed legislation to require impact evaluations of its social development programs, and the government recently created a National Council on Evaluation of Social Programs, which is expected to help ensure the quality and integrity of these evaluations. Several NGOs working on education in developing countries have undertaken impact evaluations to promote genuine institutional learning and to support resource mobilization for effective programs.² The World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and Agence Française de Développement have recently begun rigorous impact evaluations on selected topics.

Beyond these initiatives, policymakers in developing countries have expressed interest in gaining access to better information, building knowledge, and incorporating reliable evidence into policy decisions. In interviews, surveys, and meetings organized by the Center for Global Development, officials in developing countries requested several types of support to produce and use impact studies:

- independent grant review processes or certification for studies that meet internationally accepted standards of reliability and validity.
- flexible funding, outside of domestic budget procedures, to engage experts to design and conduct impact evaluations with local counterparts.
- methodological training for government staff and academic researchers; and
- formal linkages between international experts and domestic training institutions; and
- advocacy with legislators, journalists, and the public to assist with the interpretation of evaluation findings.

For the international community, too, demand for knowledge about impact is intensifying because of commitments to substantially increase aid flows in novel ways, calls to hold agencies accountable for the use of public funds, and emphasis on results and performance. International commitments, including the Millennium Development Goals, and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, create both a challenge for impact evaluation work and an opportunity to learn. But will this opportunity be seized?

Commitments to Collective Action

The solution to the evaluation gap lies in collective action around shared questions. Many governments, agencies, and NGOs are engaging in social “experiments” to address common problems that have social ramifications, such as getting girls into school, reducing out-of-pocket spending on health care, promoting behavior change to reduce health risks, and improving credit access for the poor. Individual programs are often quite small, and are not deemed to merit a full-scale impact evaluation, which can be costly in terms of a program’s total budget. However, the next generation of social programs (or social programs in other settings) is likely to address the same basic problems. So it makes sense to invest sufficient resources and time to evaluating relatively small programs because lessons learned can be of great benefit when applied to other, often larger-scale, programs in the future. Table 1 lists the elements of possible agreement to create an organization that would address these needs.

At a minimum, collective action to identify and stimulate investigations of these enduring questions should reinforce existing initiatives in governments and agencies. These actions could include demonstrating the importance of the initiatives, advocating for more resources, exchanging information, or strengthening networks.

The approach to collective action that is most likely to alter “business as usual” would be to establish a new body (for the sake of discussion, an international council) that would provide a set of core services to developing country governments and local NGOs. Table 2 presents the characteristics and trade-offs of three possible institutional structures. The core functions of such a body are listed below.³

ESTABLISH QUALITY STANDARDS FOR RIGOROUS EVALUATIONS

It is costly and confusing for each government or agency to create its own standards for rigor in impact evaluation. A council could periodically convene experts to set a common standard or endorse existing standards (e.g., those applied by the Campbell Collaboration in its systematic reviews). Making standards explicit would aid the design of new impact evaluations, serve as a reference for proposal review, and help to build local capacity for conducting and interpreting studies.

ORGANIZE AND DISSEMINATE INFORMATION

In electronic searches for information on what works in social development, the sheer number of studies and amount of data are daunting. People seeking information are often unable to distinguish high- from low-quality information. A council could collaborate with existing organizations to set up a prospective registry of impact evaluations, maintain databases of completed qualified studies, establish a clearinghouse of data for reanalysis, and encourage the production of systematic reviews.

IDENTIFY PRIORITY TOPICS

No government or agency can initiate studies on every possible policy question. Nor is it necessary to evaluate the impact of every program. Rather, a collective effort to identify the most pressing and enduring policy questions would help governments and agencies to cluster evaluations around common topics, focusing on those programs most likely to yield useful information for future policymaking. By participating in such a collective effort, governments and agencies can benefit from studies done by other institutions on programs like their own.

REVIEW PROPOSALS RAPIDLY

Reviewing proposals requires time, money, and knowledge. Large organizations and agencies may have this capacity, but smaller ones usually do not. Benefiting from economies of scale and scope, a council could organize rapid reviews with a rotating panel of experts from different fields on behalf of member organizations.

BUILD CAPACITY TO PRODUCE, INTERPRET, AND USE KNOWLEDGE

A council could enhance current efforts to build local research capacity and evaluation systems. It could:

- establish a network of expert reviewers who could also serve as technical consultants and trainers;
- reward proposals that incorporate genuine partnering with local research institutions;
- encourage new people to enter the field of evaluation with fellowships or involvement in proposals;
- brief public officials, journalists, and civil society organizations on the benefits and uses of impact evaluation; and
- disseminate training materials and reliable evidence.

CREATE A DIRECTORY OF RESEARCHERS

Governments and agencies often have difficulty finding qualified research partners. They repeatedly rely on a small set of consultants because of the high costs of identifying new ones. The council’s endorsement of standards for impact evaluation, its network of reviewers, and its database of reliable studies would generate a directory of researchers

Table 1. Elements of an Agreement: Commitments and Benefits

Independent actions to be undertaken by social ministries of developing countries, bilateral agencies, multilateral development banks, research institutions, philanthropic foundations, and nongovernmental organizations and executed by an international council.

My organization will commit to:	How my organization will benefit:
Strengthen our overall internal evaluation system	We will verify that inputs are purchased and properly applied, learn how to improve processes, document and share institutional experience, create a context for interpreting and acting on the findings of impact evaluations.
Dedicate x percent of our social program budgets to impact evaluation	We will learn from our own impact evaluations, rationalize the use of impact evaluation funds by directing them to select topics, and reduce free-riding by other signatory organizations.
Involve policymakers and project managers in the design of impact evaluations	Studies will ask relevant questions, can be designed to generate reliable evidence, and be more useful.
Follow the highest attainable standards for impact evaluations that we finance or implement	We'll have reliable inferences about the impact of a specific social program and enjoy a reputation for contributing to the evidence base.
Submit impact evaluations to a prospective registry that is publicly accessible	Information that we seek to answer our policy questions can be assessed in light of potential publication bias.
Submit completed impact evaluations to an appropriate peer review process	Our staff will have incentives to supervise and produce high-quality studies, and our studies will be more likely to be read and used when they have been externally validated.
Disseminate studies, publish primary data, and encourage production of systematic reviews	Our actions will encourage other organizations to collaborate more openly in sharing evidence, subjecting data to re-analysis to allow for corrections and build further knowledge. Also, we'll make it easier for non-experts to use the information.
Build capacity for producing and using impact evaluations in developing countries through training, collaborations, and informational exchanges.	We will be more likely to find local researchers with requisite skills to conduct impact evaluations, so resulting studies are more likely to be of good quality. Partners will be better informed about research quality, interpretation, and uses.
How my organization can participate:	How my organization will benefit:
Take part in establishing internationally agreed standards for reliable impact evaluations to which we will abide	Our studies will gain external legitimacy, and we'll find it easier to evaluate the quality of evidence coming from other organizations.
Submit studies to prospective registry and disseminate qualified studies	The more organizations that commit to feeding a prospective registry, the greater will be our ability to address publication bias.
Participate on committees to identify enduring questions and priority topics	We'll have the opportunity to influence the focus of impact evaluations in other organizations in light of our own demands for information. We'll learn about the most pressing concerns of other organizations.
Participate in the governance of the council	We can influence the council and ensure that it fulfills its mandate.
Pay or play: either conduct our own evaluations or contribute to a collective pool of funds for impact evaluation	We can choose whether to finance our own impact evaluations or participate in the collective effort by contributing funds.
The Council can:	My organization will benefit because:
Encourage local research capacity	It will be easier to find local researchers with requisite skills to conduct impact evaluations. Resulting studies are more likely to be of good quality. Partners will be better informed about research quality, interpretation, and uses.
Provide small grants to assist impact evaluation design	Our staff and managers will have access to flexible, timely funding to seize opportunities for starting impact evaluations.
Create registry of impact evaluations, and clearinghouse for evaluation results and data	Our staff and managers will have access to up-to-date evaluation findings from peer-reviewed studies. Our evaluations will have more credibility because they will be part of a registry that reduces the risk of publication bias.
Administer a review process with rotating panels of experts for impact evaluation proposals and completed studies	We can contract for the council to conduct reviews of proposals and studies when we do not have in-house capacity; easily access a list of recognized experts; readily distinguish studies that have been judged reliable by the council.
Administer a pooled impact evaluation fund	By contributing funds to a pool, we will participate in setting priorities and identifying topics; thus we can leverage resources from other organizations to evaluate programs related to our interests and activities. We will be recognized as good global citizens by contributing to the production of a valued global public good. Our staff and local counterparts will have an additional avenue for seeking funds to evaluate their programs.
Communications and dissemination	We will have an external ally to encourage the production and use of good quality research.

Table 2. Some possible institutional structures

Structural characteristics	Interagency committee	Special program within an existing organization	Secretariat
Governance	Members appoint staff to act as liaison	Members elect a supervisory committee	Members elect a board
Resources required from Members	Mainly staff time	Staff time and funds	Staff time and funds
Staffing	No specialized staff	Staff dedicated to managing technical review and support	Staff dedicated to managing technical review and support; some administrative functions
Tradeoffs			
Direct costs	Lowest	Medium	Highest
Indirect costs	Relies on borrowed staff for technical, financial, and administrative functions	Relies on borrowed staff for financial and administrative functions	Lowest indirect cost; staff members need to participate in committees, reviews, and governance
High standards of technical quality	Difficult; least agile decision-making structure and limited autonomy and engagement of technical experts	Moderate difficulty; focused managerial attention but limited autonomy and engagement of technical experts	Least difficult due to focused managerial attention and dedicated technical experts
Independence and legitimacy	Low	Low	High
International leadership	Middle	Low	High
Operational efficiency	Low cost but correspondingly low output; depends critically on efficiency of coordination mechanisms and on members' fulfilling their commitments .	Moderate costs but commensurately larger output; depends critically on efficiency of host organization and dynamic between members and host organization	Greater direct costs but correspondingly greater output; depends critically on scale economies and coordination with members
Ability to mobilize additional funds	Moderate, depending on how actively members focus on the initiative	Low, depending on how high a priority is given to the initiative within the host organization	Moderate to high, depending on engagement of members in policy decisions and demonstration of the initiative's value to stakeholders

with proven skills and expertise. With little additional effort, the council could make this information available to its members and actively encourage the use of qualified experts.

PROVIDE GRANTS FOR IMPACT EVALUATION DESIGN

The window of opportunity to design a good impact evaluation on an important question is often narrow. Too often, that window is missed for want of timely funding to engage an expert who will meet with stakeholders and assess whether an impact evaluation is appropriate, determine feasible ways to generate sound evidence, and design the evaluation. By making modest resources available at these key moments, the council could act as a powerful catalyst for more and higher quality impact evaluations.

CREATE AND ADMINISTER A POOLED IMPACT EVALUATION FUND

Coordinating and strengthening existing activities is unlikely to loosen the fundamental constraints that lead to underinvestment in good impact evaluations. But if countries and foundations

committed new and additional resources to a pooled impact evaluation fund, a number of constraints could be lifted simultaneously: Evaluations would no longer be tied to agency budget cycles, compete with implementation tasks for resources, or have their independence compromised or questioned. The council would be responsible for administering such a fund and would commission studies on topics that the membership agreed to be of high priority.

SIGNAL QUALITY WITH A “SEAL OF APPROVAL”

Policymakers cannot easily identify which studies are scientifically sound. By reviewing proposals and assessing completed evaluations according to clear and transparent standards of methodological rigor, the council could help members distinguish between stronger and weaker forms of evidence. By rating the quality of proposals and research, the council would enhance the knowledge generated from impact evaluations in several ways: (1) Researchers would have greater incentives to do rigorous studies knowing that the effort would be recognized, (2) project managers, policymakers,

and the public could more easily direct their attention to more robust evidence, and (3) efforts to build capacity could more easily identify models to emulate.

COMMUNICATE WITH POLICYMAKERS

Politicians and the public do not readily understand impact evaluations, yet the knowledge they yield should be a critical

With relatively small amounts of money, the council could act as a powerful catalyst, making it possible to do impact evaluations that might not otherwise get done

ingredient to informing public debate and policy-making. The council could help explain the benefits and uses of impact evaluation, advocate for legislation and policies to support the production and application of such knowledge, commu-

nicate and educate the media, and build public support for the endeavor. The council's network of experts, representatives from member organizations, and its own staff can give support to domestic initiatives to strengthen evaluation systems.

What Should Be Done

An intensive set of discussions with multiple stakeholders concluded that, to succeed, any new initiative should be:

- complementary to existing initiatives;
- strategic in its choice of topics and studies;
- opportunistic in its approach to supporting good impact studies;
- linked directly and regularly engaged with policymakers, governments, and agencies;
- involving collective, voluntary commitment by a set of governments and public and private agencies to conduct their own studies or contribute funds for contracting such studies by others; and
- committed to independence, credibility, and high standards for evidence.

Like with most "public good" problems, that of generating sufficient impact studies is best solved by a collective agreement from all parties to commit some level of funding to a common effort. Those committed funds can continue to be applied independently by each party to the agreement. Alternatively, a portion of those committed funds can be pooled for management by a particular entity. The question of separate or pooled funding is one of the first matters that stakeholders will have to negotiate.

A second question is how to constitute the council so that it can effectively provide the collectively beneficial services. Some options are an interagency committee; a special program within an existing organization; or a network, council, or secretariat. The structure selected should be the one that will best fulfill a range of aims, including high standards of

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Related CGD Work

Work focusing on global health is one of the Center's core areas of policy-based research. Our work on global health concentrates on the challenges and opportunities that it presents to global development and poverty reduction, including issues of aid effectiveness, making markets for vaccines, and HIV/AIDS. For related CGD materials on these issues, please refer to the following publications, which are available online at www.cgdev.org.

Owen Barder. *Vaccines for Development*. CGD Brief. (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2006).

Owen Barder and Ethan Yeh. "The Costs and Benefits of Frontloading and Predictability of Immunization." CGD Working Paper 80. (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2006).

Vijaya Ramachandran, Manju Kedia Shah and Ginger Turner. "Does the Private Sector Care About AIDS?" CGD Working Paper 76. (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2006).

When Will We Ever Learn? Closing the Evaluation Gap. CGD Working Group Report (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2006).

Ruth Levine and Molly Kinder. *Millions Saved: Proven Successes in Global Health*. (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2004).

technical quality, independence and legitimacy, operational efficiency, international leadership, and mobilization of additional resources for impact evaluation.

We are convinced that a collective approach will loosen many of the constraints that are impeding progress. Shared agenda setting, high methodological standards, and independent evaluation have the potential to vastly expand and deepen our collective knowledge base. But first, a group of leading national governments and development agencies need to recognize the huge potential of more and better impact evaluations—and they need to overcome natural institutional resistance to engaging in an ambitious new effort.

Ten years from now, when the target date for the Millennium Development Goals has come and gone, the international community could be in one of two situations. We could be as we are today, bemoaning the lack of knowledge about what really works and groping for new ideas and approaches to tackle the critical challenges of strengthening health systems, improving learning outcomes, and combating the scourge of extreme poverty. Or we could be far better able to productively use the resources for development, based on an expanded body of evidence about the effectiveness of social development strategies. The outcome lies in the decisions that leaders in developing country governments and NGOs reach over the next couple of years about the importance of conducting impact evaluations.

Endnotes

- 1 That is, the costs of producing such studies are borne by individual institutions or agencies, yet the results, once available, can be used by anyone to improve policy at little additional cost.
- 2 For example, Seva Mandir in India; Internationaal Christelijk Steunfonds in Kenya; and Freedom from Hunger in Ghana and Bolivia.
- 3 Much of this discussion draws on the Evaluation Gap Working Group's report and feedback from consultations.