

Communiqué

Improving Social Development through Impact Evaluation: A Latin American Perspective on Closing the Evaluation Gap

A Consultation held in Mexico City, Mexico, 9-10 February, 2006
Co-hosted by SEDESOL and the Center for Global Development

How can we expand the knowledge base of “what works” in social development programs? Since 2004, the Center for Global Development (CGD) has been asking this question of leaders, officials, and researchers from developing countries, bilateral agencies, development banks, NGOs and private foundations, and has found strong demand for increasing 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, CGD policy researchers 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. Several possible solutions have been formulated and critiqued through consultations with stakeholders.

At the consultation co-hosted with SEDESOL, 9-10 February in Mexico City, participants issued the following statement as an expression of individual views based on professional expertise.¹

We call upon developing country governments, multilateral agencies, bilateral agencies, private foundations, NGOs, and research centers to endorse the following principles and commit time and resources to the formation of an international initiative that will build knowledge and evidence through promoting reliable and valid studies on the impact of social programs and policies.

Principles as a guide to action

1. 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

¹ Endorsement of this statement by the individuals listed below does not, in any way, represent the official views or positions of their places of employment or institutional affiliations.

effectiveness of international aid and improve accountability of government social spending.

2. Knowledge is a public good

Once impact studies are completed and disseminated, many countries can benefit by using their findings. 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 to invest sufficiently in the implementation of such studies relative to the global value of the information that would be generated. Thus 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.

3. A collective initiative to promote impact studies is needed

The stakeholders mentioned above 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.

4. 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.

5. 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. 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.

Signed

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