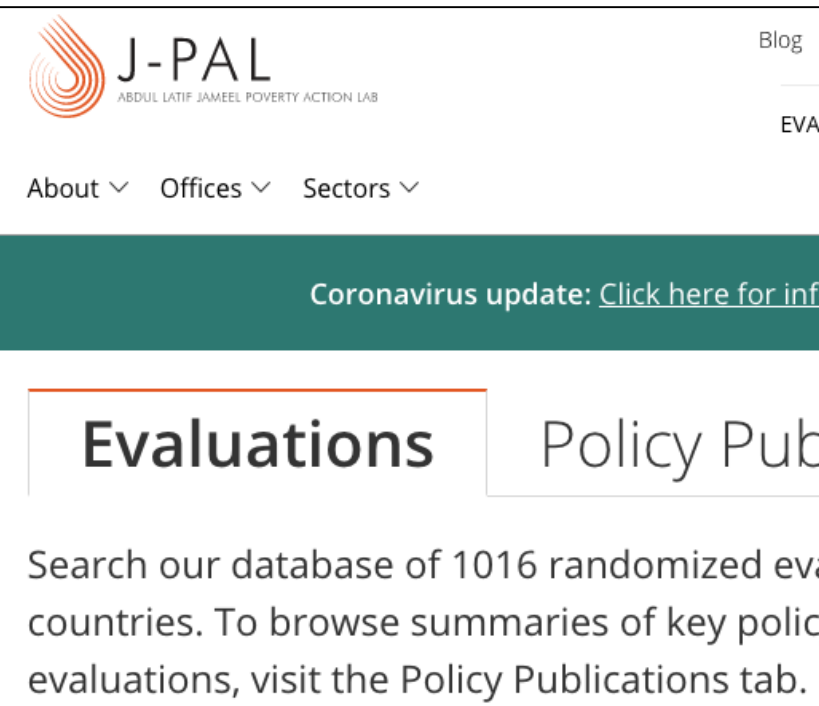


The Impact of Impact Evaluation

CGD Seminar, 8 July 2020

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J-PAL
ABDUL LATIF JAMEEL POVERTY ACTION LAB

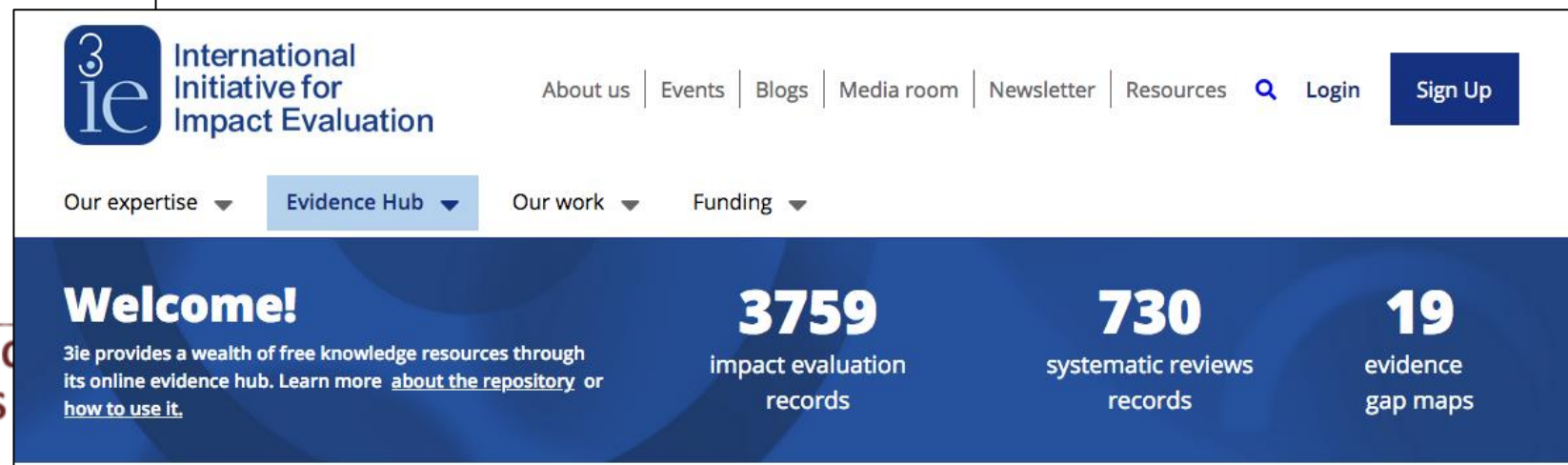
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THE IMPACT OF THE INTRODUCTION OF
GRADE R ON LEARNING OUTCOMES

WIDER Working Paper 20/2020

Core Question

Nearly 15 years after the CGD's report 'When will we ever learn?', are impact evaluation and related syntheses contributing to evidence generation and use in low- and middle-income countries?'

The report argued for a new collective push to promote rigorous evaluations of impact. It concluded that in ten years the international community could be in one of two situations.

- Bemoaning the lack of knowledge about what really works; or
- Far better able to productively use the resources for development, based on an expanded base of evidence.

“Which of those situations comes to pass has much to do with the decisions that leaders in developing country governments, NGOs, and development agencies make over the next couple of years about conducting impact evaluations.”

Evidence

- Very few studies systematically assess **effects** of impact evaluations (IEs)
- Our approach was to gather relevant data through:
 - A) Drawing on existing databases (eg 3ie, J-PAL)
 - B) Structured questions to major funders, commissioners and suppliers of IEs and related syntheses
 - C) Five country studies (Mexico, Colombia, South Africa, Uganda, Philippines)
[Contributors: Lucas Gómez and Clara Lorena Trujillo from Colombia; Carlos Bernardo O. Abad Santos, Violeta S. Corpus, and William C. Ku from Philippines; Abdul Muwanika from Uganda, Thania de la Garza and Janet Zamudio from Mexico]
- Hope that our findings will encourage further discussion of how to make the best use for the benefit of LMICs of the tools developed for rigorous and relevant impact evaluation

Overall Conclusion

Conclusion

1. Progress in rigorous evaluation is undeniable: Impact Evaluation is contributing to evidence generation and use in LMICs. We saw some good practice – not yet general practice - in improving links between researchers and policymakers. But too often there is a disconnect with the M&E systems of the LMICs themselves.
2. But it seems doubtful that the expansion of IEs and associated products has been as transformational as hoped by the authors of the ‘When Will We Ever Learn?’ report – notably in getting beyond the project level.
3. LMICs are faced with highly complex problems of sustainable growth, societal change, personal wellbeing, and the development of competent institutions. Many deep-seated issues are not readily amenable to standard IE techniques, despite much progress.
4. The pathway to policy influence is seldom straightforward. Interests often inhibit the changes that evidence recommends. LMICs are not at all immune to rhetoric about ‘post-truth’ and rejection of ‘experts’.
5. Now is the time to assess successes and challenges and to up our game, promoting more impact evaluation and synthesis amongst other tools, but also conscious efforts to promote use.

Outline

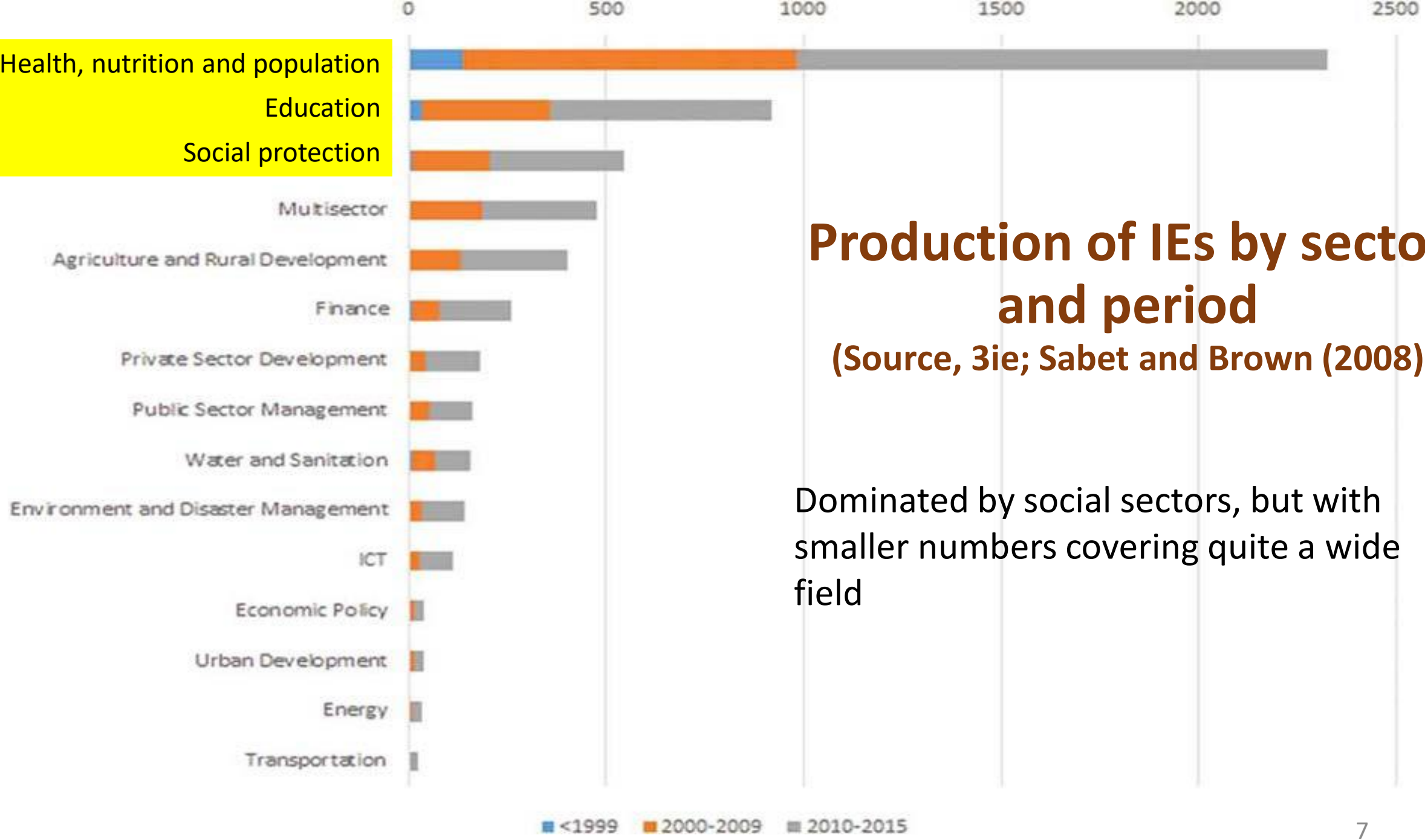
1. How has the generation of rigorous evidence developed in LMICs?
2. Use of IE/SR evidence:
 - How to define and assess 'use'? What evidence of use? What factors encourage use?
3. Where do we go from here?

The production of IEs: Numbers of impact evaluations completed (Source, 3ie Development Evidence Platform)



Very rapid increase in IEs in respect of developing countries from very low numbers to over 500 a year by 2012, but then a levelling off.

Health, nutrition and population
 Education
 Social protection



The Production of Systematic Reviews, and Greater Recognition

- Similar, but later, increase in SRs in international development - very few before 2008, over 100 published in 2016. (White 2019, quoting the 3ie database)
- RCTs become a staple of academic research, recognised with award of Nobel Prize to Bannerjee, Duflo and Kremer

An evolving product line:

More rapid and policy-relevant IEs and synthesis products

Impact Evaluations

- *RCTs* still the main approach, but increasing use of robust *experimental and quasi-experimental approaches*, where randomization is not feasible
- An increasing focus on *evaluability*, and on identifying utility of IEs at the project design phase
- Coming back to *formative and process evaluations*, facilitating adaptive programming
- Development of less expensive and less time-consuming ways of carrying out IEs, while maintaining rigour.

Synthesis Products

- *SRs* being speeded up and more user-friendly
- *Other evidence reviews*, often commissioned by individual agencies, using a variety of protocols
- *Multi-country IEs* of issues, with findings brought together in 'policy insights' etc
- *Meta-analyses* of relevant groups of impact evaluations
- *Evidence [Gap] Maps* to identify areas for further policy attention

Notable features of the Production of Impact Evaluations in International Development

- IEs and Synthesis products still very small in relation to total evaluations:
 - Most donors fund very few IEs of their programmes [MCC and USAID two exceptions];
 - In Mexico, 88 IEs from 2000-2018, but from 2007-2019 CONEVAL alone co-ordinated over 2800 other kinds of evaluation
 - In Colombia and S Africa, a higher proportion of IEs, but still modest
- IEs in LMICs mainly internationally **funded**, even in an advanced country such as Mexico and predominantly so in a poorer country such as Uganda
- International funding has a dangerously narrow base
 - DFID by far the largest funder of programmes through World Bank (DIME and SIEF) and major research programmes, and a major supporter of J-PAL, CEGA, 3ie etc
 - Gates Foundation predominant among Foundations
- Donor-funded IEs are predominantly **commissioned** by donors or specialist intermediaries.....
-and very often still **led** by a relatively small number of 'Northern' institutions despite growing local capacity

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Types of Use:

A classification based on our findings

Largely instrumental

- Adjustments to programme activities
- Decisions to continue, expand, scale down, or cancel programmes
- Use to inform the design of new programmes
- Use to inform planning and budgeting processes

Largely conceptual/symbolic

- Influencing other related programmes, either externally or within the same implementing agency (probably conceptual);
- Use for policy dialogue and debate (conceptual, symbolic);
- Use to maintain political will (symbolic);
- Use to support and validate existing policies (possibly negative symbolic);
- Use of large bodies of evidence (so, particularly SRs) to inform wider thinking (conceptual);

Largely process

- Use to justify expanding the use of M&E and IEs (instrumental, conceptual)
- Improving the culture of evidence use (conceptual)

Evidence of Use

- Almost no counterfactual based evidence and just a couple of independent evaluations of IE use by agencies
- Based on what we could find from all sources, we conclude:
 - Under ‘Largely Instrumental’: quite a lot of programme-specific use, including some examples of improving follow-on design; not much on planning and budgeting processes
 - Under ‘Largely conceptual/symbolic’: some high-profile examples (eg cash transfers, micro credit); but less than one would have hoped
 - Under ‘Largely process’: broad evidence of higher interest in IEs and M&E generally in implementing agencies exposed to IEs; anecdotal evidence of IEs ratcheting up quality and rigour of other types of evaluative work
- More details in slide pack

Features affecting use specific to IEs funded by international actors

Implications of:

Donor Funding

- If funded to *increase knowledge* of some significant issue/intervention, can be very positive, though questions of buy-in from other key stakeholders, evidence of effective use for internal learning of agencies very mixed
- If funded for *domestic accountability*, wider use of findings less likely
- Links to local 'evidence systems' not often seen as a priority

Commissioning by Donors or Agencies

- Some anecdotal evidence that commissioning by LMICs would help embed local ownership
- Similar argument for more commissioning by international policy communities
- Scope for more engagement of clients even while taking advantage of experienced commissioning systems

'Northern'- led Production

- More locally-led IEs might have more local credibility, and more in-depth knowledge of local context
- Some risk of less independence? Quality obviously vital, but growing local capacity is too
- Evidence of greater share of local leadership, but long way to go

Greater focus on instrumental use

- But also examples eg of 3ie thematic windows where contributing to evidence in the sector (conceptual use)
- Less opportunities for process use in country, but is within the donors

Factors Affecting Use: What we found

Good practice in engaging with policy-makers

Examples:

- Responding to policy-makers ready to take central role (eg Tamil Nadu and J-PAL)
 - Early discussion between policy-makers and researchers (eg DIME workshops)
 - Engaging with policy-makers throughout process (3ie and others)
 - Involving other stakeholders (eg SIEF with journalists)
 - Supporting implementation [J-PAL's Innovation in Government Initiative funds technical assistance to adapt, pilot, and scale evidence-informed innovations that have been previously undergone randomized evaluation and found effective]
 - Capacity building linked to IE (Eg CEGA/East Africa)
-
- As often, good practice not yet general practice – and of course interventions need to be context-specific

Factors Affecting Use: What we found

2. from the country studies: Facilitators

1. **Political will** in government, at both political/senior official and project levels
2. Existence of a government-backed **M&E or evaluation strategy**, with dedicated funding (and also a basis for using international funding), and resources to stimulate supply of evaluations and work with sector depts on implementation
3. **Link to central government** functions eg:
 1. Mexico, the Budgetary Consideration Report, for Congress, contains assessments of all social development programmes, with budget recommendations;
 2. Colombia, positioning of Sinergia in Dept for National Planning;
 3. SA, integration of IEs in the government-wide M&E system under Dept for Planning, M&E;
 4. Uganda, commitment by Treasury to use results from evaluations to inform resource allocation;
 5. Philippines, the central role of the National Economic and Development Authority)
4. High degree of **transparency**, and the involvement of the legislature

Factors Affecting Use: What we found

2. from the country studies (Facilitators, continued)

5. Ensuring **buy-in from the eventual owners of the study** right from the evaluation design, and working with (and encouraging) champions in the departments concerned
6. Being ready to **explain/discuss the differences** between impact evaluation, performance monitoring, and other types of evaluation and their intended purposes and outcomes, using eg formative evaluation where it is appropriate
7. Developing **recommendations in consultation with stakeholders** and maximizing knowledge-sharing through wider stakeholder validation and presentation of study outputs
8. Ensuring the **quality** of IEs
9. **Local centres of excellence** in the production of IEs
10. A clear **system for addressing recommendations**, with regular progress reports on them (eg in Mexico and SA the use of improvement plans following evaluations. The follow-up of recommendations makes it possible to systematically monitor use.)

Factors Affecting Use: What we found

2. from the country studies: Barriers

Barriers to application of IEs

- **Limited awareness of IEs** outside the health sector
- The **time and cost** needed to undertake evaluations, especially IEs: need for additional funding
- Lack of available and accessible quality **baseline data**
- IEs **not commissioned early enough**
- **Complexities** in programmes which make IEs difficult
- Limited **supply of local evaluators** able to lead counterfactual IEs

Barriers to use of IE findings

- Failure to understand information **stakeholders need** when designing studies/not enough attention paid to how the evaluation will be used by government, as opposed to evaluation methodology
- A **culture**, at least in some countries, that does not accept the kind of criticisms that evaluations inevitably present
- **Inadequate institutionalization of findings/** systems for follow up of recommendations

Outline

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Where do we go from here? (1)

- When will we ever learn? Who is going to learn? Academics, policy makers, politicians?
- We all should learn! If we learn for better public decisions, then how do we link politician's behaviour with the behaviour of scientists and rigorous evidence?
- Fortunately we had good funding over last 10–15 years which made it possible to **experiment** with many different ways of bringing researchers and policymakers together in constructive ways, both at country level and in international policy communities, engaging not just governments but also legislatures, civil society, and all forms of media.
- Also now **better understanding** of how IEs fit within a wider range of tools available to support policymakers with timely and grounded evidence.
- But we still need better communication strategies between scientists and politicians. We need better narratives on both sides.
- We also need to link evidence with the incentives of policy makers.

Where do we go from here? (2)

- Greater **local ownership** of IEs is highly desirable.
- Donor finance and commissioning has been key, but our sense is that a **more balanced pattern of finance, commissioning and supply of IEs is needed** if IEs are to become a more accepted part of national evidence systems.
- Important that scarce **donor funding** is responsive to priority concerns of countries and of the international community.
- Appears to be reduced appetite by donors to fund **underlying public goods** such as repositories of IEs. *As much knowledge is gained by accretion, this would be unfortunate.*
- This is a good time to reflect on how to **promote better evidence systems** and **better use** of the evidence that IEs and associated syntheses provide. Much scope for learning between countries, and indeed donor agencies.

Thank you

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