



# Investing in a New Era of Evidence-Informed Decision Making to Improve and Save Lives: Recommendations for Philanthropies

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## Background: CGD's Working Group on New Evidence Tools for Policy Impact

Since the 2006 release of the Center for Global Development report *When Will We Ever Learn: Improving Lives Through Impact Evaluation*, and building on evaluations of cash transfer programs in the 2000s, there have been nearly two decades of progress in generating and using evidence for public policy decisions and development programs.<sup>1</sup> One area of clear momentum is the steady increase in the number of impact evaluations, a rigorous approach that establishes the attributable net impact of a project or program. Their ability to assess attribution makes impact evaluations uniquely well suited for decision making. A global community of researchers and organizations conducting these evaluations and related evidence activities has also grown substantially in recent years. All the while, notable advances in data and evaluation methodologies and practices have enabled faster, lower-cost, and larger-scale evaluations, expanding the application of impact evaluation tools to new domains. And increasingly, impact evaluations are paired with complementary quantitative and qualitative information that help derive policy-relevant inferences.

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on an unfinished agenda and underscored the need for high-quality, timely, and

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PHILANTHROPIES

1. Adjust current grantmaking to better meet high-value decision-making needs of lower-income country governments
2. Identify opportunities for shared learning and aligned funding
3. Develop new funding consortia for policy-responsive evaluation

context-specific evidence. Across sectors, decision makers within governments, aid agencies, multilateral organizations, and NGOs have not yet fully harnessed the value of evidence for better public policies. Numerous challenges limit evidence use. On the

demand side, impact evaluations may lack relevance to policy decisions and fail to respond to the priorities, timelines, and questions of decisionmakers. On the supply side, decision makers often lack institutional incentives and funding to generate and act on relevant evidence. Current funding models further compound these challenges by contributing to misaligned incentives between policymaker needs and academic researchers.

In response to these challenges and building on progress to date, CGD launched the Working Group on New Evidence Tools for Policy Impact to develop a renewed agenda for the next generation of investments in impact evaluation and related evidence systems to enhance their value for real-world decision making. The working group brought together a diverse set of policymakers and experts to review recent progress and examine how to address remaining obstacles to the use and utility of evidence for global development.

The working group's final report highlights how far the field has come in addressing persistent critiques about the scale, generalizability, and policy utility of impact evaluation. It also offers recommendations to the development community on "what and how to fund to deliver on the promise of impact evaluation *and* bolster the broader evidence ecosystem" as two intertwined goals. Specifically, the working group proposes five ways to improve impact evaluation funding and practice: (1) design evaluations that start from the policy question and decision space; (2) harness technology for timely, lower-cost evidence; (3) advance locally grounded evidence-to-policy partnerships; (4) enact new incentives and structures to strengthen evidence use; and (5) invest in evidence leaders and communities. The working group's reinvigorated agenda aims to optimize the benefits and full potential of impact evaluation for improved social and economic well-being around the world.

To illustrate the application of this agenda to specific development funders, the working group developed detailed recommendations for three key audiences with strong existing foundations for evaluation and evidence use to complement

*To explore dozens of related resources, a digital timeline on over two decades of progress in the impact evaluation landscape, and other interactive content, visit [www.CGDev.org/evidence-to-impact](http://www.CGDev.org/evidence-to-impact)*

and leverage country government funding: philanthropies, USAID, and the World Bank. This brief details how philanthropies can invest in a new era of evidence-informed policy decisions to improve and save lives. It is based on working group discussions, a roundtable and numerous consultations with philanthropic funders and other experts, and background research over the course of the project. Accompanying briefs directed to USAID and the World Bank can be found at [www.CGDev.org/evidence-to-impact](http://www.CGDev.org/evidence-to-impact).

## **Investing in a new era of evidence-informed decision making to improve and save lives**

We now have decades of learning about what is required to increase the use of data and evidence for better public policies. There are numerous examples from around the world demonstrating how the use of data and evidence can inform policy decisions, including major national reforms, with tangible impacts on well-being.<sup>2</sup> Building on this track record, philanthropic funders now have an opportunity to accelerate social progress by investing in a powerful new era of evidence-informed policymaking.

Amid the imperative to spend public resources more effectively brought on by the COVID-19 crisis and the renewed

focus on decolonizing development, now is the time to invest in more systematic efforts to generate and use rigorous evidence that responds to policymaker priorities. This brief proposes three main ways for philanthropies to take this agenda forward.

## **1. Adjust current grantmaking to better meet high-value decision-making needs of lower-income country governments**

To enhance the real-world impact of available grantmaking, philanthropic funders should:

### ***1.1 Increase investments in research designed to inform real-time policy decisions through sustained engagement with policymakers***

In addition to supporting long term knowledge generation, data and evidence are especially valuable when they inform policy decisions that directly impact lives and improve the allocation of public resources. Indeed, a wide range of funders have increasingly expressed interest in supporting research and evaluation that is linked to tractable demand and responsive to in-country priorities. But more flexible investments are needed to enable researchers and government partners to collaboratively identify and answer high-priority policy questions.

### ***1.2 Pair investments in research and evaluation with capacity-focused support to national and local governments***

At present, most research funding omits financial support for embedded technical assistance within government processes and systems to facilitate evidence uptake throughout the program life cycle. Building on existing embedded evidence models, philanthropies could support large-scale fellowships that fund academics and other technically focused teams to deliver embedded support within government agencies.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, investments in embedded labs could bolster in-house evidence brokers and strengthen capacity for commissioning, generating, and using evidence. Expanded support for network- and community-building

efforts to connect researchers and evaluators with evidence-oriented government counterparts would also be valuable. Where feasible, philanthropic funders should complement investments in specific evaluations with support for the enabling ecosystem for evidence use. For example, funders aligned with effective altruism should routinely offer grants to support dissemination and policy uptake, alongside investments in particular research studies and/or in specific priority areas (e.g., immunization or malaria) as one way to bolster the broader evidence ecosystem in lower-income countries.

### ***1.3 Provide flexible support to researchers who are proximate to policymakers***

Investments should prioritize policy-minded researchers and evaluators with deep understanding of the operating environment and knowledge of how evaluation questions fit with policy priorities. More flexible core funding for organizations to undertake longer-term efforts to inform evidence-based policymaking, as opposed to time-bound projectized financing, must also be a priority.<sup>4</sup> In many cases, these goals will require reversing trends in funding organizations that lack presence in a given country or deep knowledge of the policy context; this is not solely linked to geography, as many members of diaspora have valuable local knowledge and policy proximity. Local and global expertise are not mutually exclusive. Rather, philanthropic grantmaking should strive to invert power dynamics by investing resources in locally based institutions to help expand core institutional capacity.

### ***1.4 Invest in underlying data systems and analytical capacity to enable faster, lower-cost, and more policy-relevant evidence***

Recent advances in data availability and analytical tools offer strong prospects for faster, lower-cost studies with enhanced usability and relevance for public policy decisions.<sup>5</sup> Deploying philanthropic funding at a larger scale to support data collection, quality, and the underlying infrastructure (including national statistical systems) would

yield large gains by supporting better decisions that lead to improved policy outcomes. Increased investments are also needed to support those who can analyze data and facilitate their engagement with policymakers for evidence uptake. Philanthropic funders should provide resources to strengthen capacity within governments and among policy-proximate researchers to turn rich sources of data into relevant and useable evidence-based insights for real-world policies, especially on comparative cost-effectiveness information as a key decision-making input. Funders should also support more evidence synthesis efforts for decisions in specific areas with high-quality existing evidence, drawing on new synthesis tools and approaches for concise and timely takeaways.<sup>6</sup>

Near-term action: Philanthropies should develop internal guidelines to identify and pursue a wider range of national and regional policy-proximate grantees, set requirements for evidence generation for program design and scale-up, and implement necessary changes in proposal reviews and other practices in line with the recommendations above on policy proximity, decision responsiveness, capacity strengthening, and data tools.

## 2. Identify opportunities for shared learning and aligned funding

Disparate, uncoordinated investments in evidence generation and the broader evidence ecosystem currently yield less-than-optimal results—and in some cases may even foster competition for limited resources and attention from policymakers. To harness greater impact from their investments, philanthropic funders should engage in more information sharing and streamlined coordination with each other. The Transforming Evidence Funders Network, based at the Pew Charitable Trusts, offers one useful model of how funders can regularly share lessons learned across sectors and geographies, discuss how to improve their own

grantmaking practices, and identify where collaboration and aligned funding would offer meaningful value-add.<sup>7</sup>

Networks and platforms to share information and coordinate efforts across funders can unlock several benefits. Opportunities for philanthropic funders to join forces to influence bilateral and multilateral donors are especially important not only for mobilizing additional resources, but also for informing specific policy decisions, particularly those receiving significant resources. For example, COVID-19 vaccine delivery programs, a major recent focus for multilateral and bilateral financing, would greatly benefit from aligned investments in systematic testing of different delivery strategies. And as more resources go toward climate interventions in the coming years, philanthropic funders should coordinate on which high-priority questions to investigate and ways to help build the overall evidence base in this priority area. Greater information sharing could also help identify opportunities where one or more funders may be able to provide non-sector-specific funding alongside sector-specific grants for broader enabling environment activities. Last, to facilitate greater support for policy-proximate researchers and local research organizations, philanthropic funders could develop joint funding pipelines to ensure more aligned funding across sectors and geographies.

Near-term action: Funders interested in information sharing should come together to exchange strategies and grantmaking plans around the evidence ecosystem and establish a regular series of facilitated discussions.

## 3. Develop new funding consortia for policy-responsive evaluation

Philanthropies—especially those with more flexible resources—should establish new funding consortia that pool resources to generate evidence in support of high-value public policy priorities and reform opportunities

(pooled funding should be complementary *and* additional to recommendation 1.1, discussed above). These pooled funds should be demand-driven by design; as part of routine funding cycles, governments and NGOs would receive ongoing support to articulate their own evidence agendas based on their most pressing questions and policy-relevant opportunities. Resources from demand-driven pooled funds would then enable governments to implement their learning agendas in collaboration with researchers through equitable, effective partnerships. This arrangement would both build evidence and incentivize its use by directly linking evidence production to decision-maker demand. Such efforts could draw from the experience of the Network of Impact Evaluation Researchers in Africa's new Demand-Driven Research Initiative and existing learning agendas, such as those supported by the US Office of Evaluation Sciences.<sup>8</sup>

Demand-driven pooled funds have the potential to yield large benefits within the broader evidence-based policy-making field. Notably, support for learning partnerships and/or flagship evaluations that are implemented with close engagement from senior government leaders and that inform important policies could lead to significant reforms with tangible impacts on lives and/or save public resources.

In principle, these funding consortia could be designed to incentivize participation by bilateral funders. As one example, philanthropies should partner with USAID on a localization and evidence initiative to provide sustained support to policy-proximate researchers, research organizations, and evidence collaboratives in a set of lower-income countries.<sup>9</sup> Philanthropy would contribute flexible, longer-term financing for medium-term institutional support to enable greater policy responsiveness and sustainability. USAID resources would fund local evidence organizations or consortia with project-specific support to undertake evaluation, policy dialogue, and evidence uptake activities in shared areas of interest, especially those in high-value but neglected areas, such as climate or immunization.

The scope of these funding consortia could either be sector or non-sector specific—and participation will depend on each funder's grantmaking constraints. Many philanthropies have multiyear sector-specific priorities, goals, and grantmaking strategies with benefits throughout the nonprofit ecosystem.<sup>10</sup> These internal strategies often pose difficulties to complementary or pooled efforts between funders, but given the ways in which evidence-based policy-making can vary between sectors and countries, more tailored sector-specific approaches could be valuable.

While there are various options to consider for the structure and institutional setup, such a fund should ideally be based at and involve one or more existing institutions with the appropriate financial management and regranting capabilities. If channeled in more equitable and just ways, joint funding and programming for impact evaluation and broader evidence systems in key sectors and priority areas can spur significant economies of scale to improve outcomes.

Near-term action: Funders interested in collaborating on new funding consortia to pool resources for policy-responsive evaluation should gather for facilitated discussions to align on vision, success metrics, structure, and design principles.

## Endnotes

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