The Quest for the “Holy Grail” of Development Impact

EVENT SUMMARY

When: Wednesday, December 12, 2018 | 3:00 PM - 4:30 PM

Moderator

Berta Heybey | Managing Director, Monitoring and Evaluation, Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC)

Speakers

Melissa Patsalides | Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Policy Planning and Learning, USAID
Holta Trandafili | Research, Learning, and Analytics Manager, World Vision US
Cynthia Clapp-Wincek | Former Director of the Office of Learning, Evaluation and Research, USAID

To see event photos, please click here.
Event Description

The “holy grail” of development impact has long eluded international development organizations – that is, clear evidence that a development investment has achieved the intended effect. Impact evaluations are an important tool but are rare, expensive, and not always implemented rigorously or utilized adequately – even though the findings could provide an invaluable feedback loop for future program design. This session explored the ways in which various development partners are conducting rigorous evaluation and learning activities, highlighting the findings to hold themselves accountable for results (or failures), and utilizing the learning produced to re-invest where interventions are working and/or identifying when a different approach may be more effective.

Key Takeaways

1. **The evaluation should match the intervention.**
   Melissa Patsalides (USAID) emphasized that Monitoring & Evaluation should have a right-sized approach. Implementing partners should ensure that their evaluations do not ask unrealistic or unrelated questions. She believes that the notion that there is such a thing as a “holy grail” or “silver bullet” evaluation is dangerous; a randomized controlled experiment is not appropriate for every intervention. Instead, Melissa suggests that development actors should consider the size and incentives of the organization to help shape the evaluation.

2. **Involving community members in evaluations can be helpful but is a trade-off for independence.**
   Holta Trandafili (World Vision US) described an evaluation that included local community members to improve the buy-in from the community. In a project in Zambia, community members were involved with collecting the baselines and worked with World Vision through the end of the project when they created reports. Holta explained that the community members involved were very enthusiastic about the report’s results. They brought the report to the community and explained what they would be doing with it. While involving community members can ensure buy-in, Cynthia Clapp-Wincek (former USAID) raises the caveat that their involvement is a trade-off for an independent investigation because the local population has different incentives than an independent organization.

3. **“Don’t buy more rigor than you need.”**
   While some projects may need to be extremely thorough, Cynthia emphasized that circumstances exist where no amount of rigor will convince some people. Therefore, implementing partners should ensure that they have enough rigor for their own needs and trust that there is enough to be used for informed decision-making. She explained that in some cases, the methodology of an evaluation could hijack the actual impact of the project, which is clearly an undesired outcome. Melissa found that embedding an evaluator in program implementations could often produce better outcomes. If the evaluations are less defined from the start, each step of the process could inform the next iteration of the project and evaluation, which can lead to a better development impact.

4. **Evaluators and implementing organizations should publish their results with decision-makers in mind.**
   Berta Heybey (MCC) suggested that evaluation briefs should be no more than four pages because people’s attentions spans are quite short. Holta added that the executive summary should include the changes that the organizations want to make because often the summary is the only thing people read. Furthermore, she suggested that Monitoring & Evaluation teams should work with the communications department to ensure that their reports have distilled the important information and include useful visuals. Also, Holta advised that while writing reports, implementers should be careful about what they are comparing their results to. For example, when World Vision started evaluating the sustainability of their child sponsorship programs, the results seemed disappointing. However, they had nothing concrete to compare their results to, so they struggled to communicate their impact fairly.