Towards Closing the Evaluation Gap: Lessons from Three Recent Impact Evaluations in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Objectives

- Identify barriers that prevent rigorous impact evaluations in Latin America and the Caribbean

- Outline key practices for future impact evaluations in the region
Designs for Impact Evaluations

- Rigor is high validity, accuracy, and reliability of impacts

- Randomized control trial
- Regression discontinuity
- Matched comparison
- Non-matched comparison
- Simple pre-post

Most rigorous

Least rigorous
The Evaluation Gap

- Limited demand and supply of rigorous impact evaluations

- Gradual increase in demand
  - Millennium Challenge Corporation
  - World Bank and regional development banks
  - National governments

- Limited increase in supply
  - PROGRESA-Oportunidades in Mexico and Bolsa Família in Brazil
  - Vocational education in Colombia
  - Pre-school education in Chile
MCC Compact (El Salvador)

- **Education Intervention:**
  - Improvement of secondary schools, a post-secondary center, and scholarships targeted to poor youths and adults in the Northern Zone

- **Productive Development Intervention:**
  - Technical and material assistance, loans, and guarantees targeted to micro and small producers in the Northern Zone

- **Financing:** Conditional grant from MCC

- **Implementation:** FOMILENIO

- **Evaluation mandate:** Rigorous designs, according to feasibility
PATH (Jamaica)

- **Intervention**: Cash transfers to participant households (conditional transfers for children; unconditional transfers for adults)
- **Target population**: Poor children, adults, and elderly throughout the nation
- **Financing**: Loan from the World Bank
- **Implementation**: Ministry of Labor and Social Security
- **Evaluation mandate**: Support for a rigorous design
Hábitat Program (Mexico)

- **Intervention:** Funds allocated to municipalities to support urban, social and community development
- **Target population:** Marginalized families in cities or metropolitan areas
- **Financing:** Interamerican Development Bank
- **Implementation:** Secretaría de Desarrollo Social
- **Evaluation mandate:** Not defined
Barriers Are Multidimensional

1. Lack of support for rigorous designs
   - Skepticism about practicality of random assignment
   - Implementation incentives misaligned with evaluation

2. Ambitious and unrealistic schedules for designing and implementing programs
   - Evaluation started after the program was launched
   - Urgency to get the program started without accounting for the evaluation design
Barriers Are Multidimensional

3. Little or no early planning nor interest to build on lessons learned
   - Unplanned pilots
   - Potential interference with evaluation

4. Data limitations
   - Availability of only secondary data
   - Infeasibility of collecting independent primary data
Key Practices Are Evolving

1. Maintaining early communication with key decision makers
   - Identify key stakeholders
   - Propose range of feasible designs
   - Identify barriers and propose alternatives
   - Set stage for future coordination

2. Confirming that the evaluation will answer key questions
   - Inform implementers how and when the evaluation will answer the questions
Key Practices Are Evolving

3. Choosing designs that fit implementation plans with minimal modifications
   - PATH evaluation

4. Limiting discussion of the design’s technical aspects to a group of experts

5. Ensuring that all parties understand the evaluation’s legal framework
   - MCC Compact evaluation
Rigor vs. Feasibility of the Final Design

For evaluators there is tension between:

• the rigor of the design
• the financial, logistical and political limitations of implementing the design
  » PATH evaluation
  » Hábitat evaluation
  » MCC Compact evaluation
Skills Required for Leading a Successful Evaluation

- In-depth understanding of each evaluation’s context
- Detailed knowledge of evaluation methodology
- Excellent communication and negotiation skills
- A lot of flexibility
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