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Using Evaluation Findings to Inform Inclusive Growth Policy-Making

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Presenters

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Ross Conner: Ross Conner, now at the University of California at Irvine. My work has mostly involved community health, but those of you who know the World Health Organization model know that that means anything that communities will define. So quite broad, from agriculture to health, I suppose in the traditional medical way, or education.

In terms of Hector and Lina's presentation, and indeed my career started with a randomized control trial, the program some of you may know and may have watched called "Sesame Street" in its early, early days -- that tells you how far back my career goes. But the group that started it really was interested in its effect. And I was involved in a small way, on a randomized control trial, and it demonstrated one of the points that they were mentioning, how even with the support of people at many different levels you really need to be concerned with process as well as outcome and impact.

I won't tell you all the stories but very briefly one part of the design involved giving the program to certain households and withholding the program to certain households. So it was shown on television in a very special way. Very quickly, though, the households themselves found out who had access

to the program, so the children who were in the control households would come over to the other households to watch the program. So it was what the researchers would call "contamination".

But in fact -- good word, Steven -- when you think of it, from the community's perspective it wasn't that, it was exploitation, and seizing the opportunity, seizing the open window, as you all called it. So it made great sense. But if the researchers had not paid attention to what was happening there would have been no real differences, right? And so the conclusion might have been that the program resulted in no changes.

Since then I've done other kinds of studies involving many different methodologies. I think I end with really a mix of the importance of having comparisons of some sort, not necessarily randomized. I think the programs that J-PAL and a few others do is it's a rare occurrence that how all the players and resources in line to get that, but there are other kinds of models that can be very good at answering questions too. I would agree that we, researchers, need to do the most rigorous job we can with the methodology we designed. And in my case I think I usually feel we need some sorts of comparisons as well as definite attention to process.

Now, to comment about what I'll call policy influence, from a researcher's standpoint, I want you to think about not the research or the evaluation work, but the policymakers and the contexts that they are in. And that's where we have to begin to really understand what it means to have some policy influence.

These are contexts that are constantly changing for policy makers, indeed the policy makers themselves are changing, with many different pressures, from ideological to political to personal -- the list goes on. That is a very different kind of process than most researchers are used to, one with many different pressures. And if we realize that we can humbly, perhaps, have some policy influence, not necessarily be a policy maker and that many times it's going to take a long time to have some of these changes. There are cases like those that Hector described where you're able to have on board many of the different stakeholders at least at the macro level to do these things. But even in your case I guess Lina said that elections were coming and they were going to be changing very quickly. So you have to scramble.

If we see ourselves as providing the best information we can from the methodology that's appropriate for the work we need to do, putting that out there, informing others, probably developing networks that others who can advocate for us so that we stay a bit more than I guess Hector might recommend, not only on the advocacy side but the delivery of the best information that's possible, and then letting other stakeholders maybe take it to the next step. It's a fine line, but we researchers generally have our credibility because we provide what people see as objective, reasoned, unbiased information.

The minute or advocacy becomes too strong people can question our basis of credibility. So it's a very fine line we have to be careful of. Just some thoughts.

Steve Mills: Okay, I see notes, like I was this morning, from FHI 360 which like this morning used to be Family

Health International. But anyway just to follow up on Ross's comments, which I very much agree with.

So the work the J-PAL did in the study groups was great, and rigor was definitely a part of it. And as Hector pointed out, I think most of us know randomized control trials are what are considered gold standard in research and evaluation, right? But I think we also need to remind ourselves it's not always gold that's needed.

We also need to be a little humble that it's usually not -- and probably always -- not just evaluation that's needed, and that we have to think out of the evaluation box.

A couple of examples. So part of my career has been in HIV over the years, both in the U.S. and Asia. In the U.S. in the early years we had excellent data on what was happening HIV. There were questions, but we had excellent data. Did data move the HIV budget in America? I would say no. I have four words that rocked the budgets in America: "Rock Hudson" and "Magic Johnson".

These people were not data, they were one -- or two people data points, but they were not the data as we evaluation people like to say. These were celebrities who had the virus, and who together with the data, really helped to move the policy agenda forward, certainly not as much looking back as we wanted to at the time but it certainly moved it a bit more forward.

Another example: do we have enough data on the importance of needle exchange for reducing the HIV epidemic among drug users? Yes. Do we need to do another randomized control trial on that? No. Do we need to do much more

evaluation work on the efficacy and effectiveness of needle exchange programs for injection drug users? No. Do we need to do a randomized control trial on the importance of breastfeeding for children? No. These are just a couple of examples, and I'm sure many of you can name others where the issue is not the effectiveness, the issue is what to do with the data, and how to then affect change, which we all know is difficult. It's difficult in our personal lives when we have enough data in our personal lives to make change, but still we don't make that change. And it's difficult for governments to do the same thing.

Another example: tobacco consumption, cigarette smoking. Most of you know what is the most effective strategy to reduce cigarette smoking.

Audience: Three children. They tell you not to smoke!

Steve: Have children? I don't know if that one's been tested; maybe through a randomized control trial.

Audience: Taxes!

Steve: Okay, someone gave the correct answer: taxes on cigarettes. But why is that difficult for many governments? Because many governments are the actual makers of cigarettes and bring in a lot of taxes for their own functioning. So they don't necessarily want to raise taxes. They would rather sponsor, or have donors sponsor mass media campaigns and school-based communication programs on the evils of smoking, which are not really very effective. They're partially effective and should be part of an overall comprehensive tobacco reduction program, but if taxation isn't out there you're really not going to see the declines in tobacco smoking.

So just to give those examples. And finally some of you may have heard about -- well, it's not that new now but new as things go: translational medicine. This whole field is how to take findings in medicine and make sure that clinicians use them.

I just found this morning that on average there are 55 results each day from clinical trials in medicine. Each day 55 new trial results. So how do people in medicine translate all of that so that physicians and nurses and everybody can digest all these new findings, which ones are at the level of randomized control trials and which have certain impacts for certain clinicians and which don't. It's a big area. And the Institute of Medicine in the U.S., which again, a relatively resource-rich country, has come up with a statistic of -- and I think this is a good one to leave with maybe for the day: it takes an average of almost 15 years for a finding in a clinical trial to reach widespread use among the physician population in the U.S.

So, we evaluators need to think, "Well, again, it's not just about the data." Let's have the data but then we also have to help think about what are the impediments, those accelerators that take those research findings and then move them either to the policy level, move them up, or move them down then to providers or whoever's behavior we're interested in changing. Thank you.

Bob Birkenes: Thank you, Steve. I'm Bob Birkenes, the Program Officer here at RDMA, the regional mission in Asia.

This is a vital question for us. Me, I represent -- I'm working on the U.S. government side, not the research side or the implementer side, but the question about how to elevate policy level -- or

sorry, project level evaluation findings to broad scale national policymaking, and to influence policy makers, this is vital to us. It's not something that we would avoid, in fact we expect, we hope to be able to influence policy makers in the countries where we work. And evaluations are one way that we do that.

But what I have to say is this mission has I think in a couple of cases taken a creative approach and I'd like to share some of that with you.

Traditionally USAID takes this approach for sharing evaluations. We have a website called the Development Experience Clearinghouse, the DEC, I think it's called DEC.org or something like that. All evaluations must be uploaded to that large database. And there must be hundreds of evaluations every year. I would say that's a pretty passive way to share information, but people can go there and search and find things. But is the press going there and looking? No, probably not. If they are they're looking for something bad to report, most likely. So there's nobody really combing that, looking for lessons learned and best practices.

So I think that's been our approach, having a good database with accessible information for a while, and we keep improving that approach. But to my mind that's too passive. We have to more actively promote sharing of best practices and lessons learned that we get from our evaluations.

Not every lesson needs to be shared. Some of what we get out of evaluations are just useful for the project itself, maybe to change the approach. Some things might be too sensitive; you might discover something about your host country, or

it's too critical and you don't want to publish it broadly. But for those items that I would say, those learnings that are going to improve development effectiveness and change the way that we approach a problem, that's something we would want to share. And share in particular with audiences who are going to be able to change policy.

And who are those audiences? I think that's the first question. I'm trying to think like a development outreach communications person; we have one expert in our room right here in Chris Belham; Chris Belham works for the mission here. And that's his primary job is to work on outreach and communications. But some of us like to put on that hat once in a while and think who is the audience, who are we trying to influence in terms of policymaking?

We have the host country governments, the ones that we work with and the ministries, of course, but there's another audience that I would highlight and that is civil society, NGOs. And especially in the civil society's capacity to engage constructively with government in the countries where we're working. So it isn't us only talking to the ministry but there is civil society out there; they are learning, they are finding out a new approach or a problem and then they are going themselves to lobby government, as you would hope to see in a democracy.

We also would want to reach out to regular citizens and try and build awareness of some certain kinds of findings, not everything. And we would also like to share the knowledge with other donors, other development professionals. So the question is -- I'll give an example, a more concrete

example. This is not just a generic instructions but I'm coming to that.

How do we reach people? I think one important lesson that we learned from the presentation was first of all including the government, the stakeholders early on but also presenting information that was useful to them. And in this case that valuable feedback in the form of those graphs showing the control group and the experiment group, very helpful, very useful and showed the success of their intervention. That's exactly what a policy maker wants to see.

But so I think the way Hector phrased it is looking at what is it that policy makers care about, in other words understanding their interests, what is important to them. So this is something that we would look at if we wanted to share the results of an evaluation finding with policy makers you have to be able to express it in a way that they will understand why this is important to them.

What I mean when I said "be creative" or use all channels to communicate here I'd like to give an example. At RDMA we have a project called the Mekong Adaptation and Resilience to Climate Change project. They had issues a report recently called a Climate Change Adaptation and Impact Study which was -- the reason I'm looking at my notes is there's some fancy words here -- they conducted "a modeling approach to quantify changes in hydro, meteorological variables over time.

Now that's a pretty scientific way of saying they were tracking in the Mekong area changes in rainfall, changes in temperature. That's a scientific study that has broader interests, interests to

anyone who is anywhere connected with disaster risk reduction or agriculture or many, many different -- city planner as well -- knowing what are the expected changes due to climate change in rainfall and flooding and all that.

So we had some evaluation findings and we wanted to share them. And what we did here -- traditionally now we will use our outreach function -- we are the U.S. government; we can put out press releases of our project findings, that's traditional. We would upload the evaluation to the Experience Clearinghouse like I mentioned but that's passive.

What we will also do now is try to engage with the press. So we would get local press involved, maybe hold a press conference. We will also use social media, so we would post some things on our Twitter account, post some things on our Facebook account. Now when you do that -- this is a slightly new approach for us -- we're government people; we're a little bit behind the cutting edge. We're just catching up with the 21st century, at least in my case. I can always speak for me.

But by doing that, by using these channels -- these are sort of non-traditional channels for communicating development lessons. We tweet our ambassador and many other high level officials who then kind of re-tweet. We also attracted the attention then of -- so we went out, local press, picked up the story on this report, thought it was interesting -- a bigger newspaper -- Chris could give us the details -- a national level newspaper picked it up, Reuters picked it up. Eventually this is now getting press coverage. And for me what's exciting is traditionally for USAID we used to

think of outreach and communications as just a way of kind of branding USAID, you know, this is what we're doing, we're getting credit for the money we're spending, we want people to know about our good work.

This is different. This is a different approach, which is we would like to stimulate a development dialog, and we will use these channels. And is it reaching the policy makers? I don't know yet. I think this story is a lot smaller scale, a little bit harder to track than the example with Indonesia. But by doing that, by engaging with large number of citizens in the region and civil society they then will turn and influence the policy makers. And that's something that we're very interested in here. And it's a slightly different approach, I think, for USAID. That's all. Thank you.

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