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Dealing with complexity in evaluative analysis

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A recent (famous) RCT published in a highly prestigious journal evaluated a program in an African country seeking to both enhance employment opportunities and empower local communities. The authors found “positive short-run effects on local public goods and economic outcomes, but no evidence for sustained impacts on collective action, decision making, or the involvement of marginalized groups, suggesting that the intervention did not durably reshape local institutions.” (emphasis added)

What does one conclude from this study?
Defining ‘complex’ interventions
(when everything in development is complicated)

A development issue is ‘complex’ when it entails lots of

1. Face-to-face interaction
   • E.g., education: ~16,000 hours of instruction to produce ‘us’

2. Discretion
   • Impose fines or warning? Medical treatment A or B? Remove children from family?

3. Imposed obligations
   • Taxation, regulation, inspection, policing (c.f., health, education)

4. Unknown (ex ante) solutions
   • ‘Building the rule of law’; empowering minorities; ensuring ‘accountability’
Characteristics of ‘complex’ interventions

Yield highly variable outcomes across

1. Time
   • Impact trajectories likely to be non-linear, non-uniform

2. Contexts
   • Dependent on compatibility with / legitimacy in local idiosyncrasies

3. Groups
   • Results in Population A ≠ Population B ≠ Sub-population B

4. Scales of operation
   • Small to large: $x \neq y$, but $10x \neq 10y$ (great math; terrible social science)

5. Implementing organization
   • NGO ≠ Government ≠ Company ≠ NGO2
Why trajectories of change matter
Why trajectories of change matter

Net Impact

Time

‘Baseline’

‘Follow up’
Why trajectories of change matter

The diagram illustrates the concept of trajectories of change over time. The vertical axis represents the Net Impact, and the horizontal axis represents Time. The graph shows different trajectories labeled as 'Baseline', 'Follow up', and 'The future'. The diagram emphasizes the importance of understanding how changes unfold over time for effective planning and decision-making.
Social Development (CDD) and Governance programs in FCV as (highly) ‘complex’ interventions

- Numerous, ongoing face-to-face interactions / negotiations
- Wide discretion for frontline agents
  - E.g., village facilitators, agricultural extension officers, local magistrates
- Pervasive monitoring (principal-agent) problems
- Often politically contentious
  - Direct challenge to incumbent authority
- Highly context dependent
  - High variance in performance across time, space, groups, agencies
- Non-uniform (non-linear) trajectory of impacts
Consequences for evaluation

Among other things…

1. Assessing net impact is hard, deeply contingent, time bound
   • Standard identification (‘internal validity’) assumptions routinely violated
   • E.g., Unit homogeneity assumption (everyone receives identical treatment)

2. Generalizing is harder still
   • Compatibility with / legitimacy in particular places

3. Knowledge rarely aggregates
   • Lots of necessary ‘reinventing of the wheel’
     • Higgs boson particle (5154 co-authors!) vs Parenting/Governing
   • Organizations struggle to ‘learn’ (IEG 2014, on the WB)
   • ‘Systematic Reviews’ inherently problematic, contested
What to do?

Beyond ‘rigorous method’ per se as sole arbiter of ‘impact’

1. Interpret empirical claims via explicit theory of change
   • Standard identification (‘internal validity’) assumptions routinely violated
     • E.g., Unit homogeneity assumption (everyone receives identical treatment)
   • What is reasonable to expect by when? (Sunflowers versus Oak trees…)
   • Beyond calculating means (LATE) to understanding variation

2. Forge corresponding monitoring revolution
   • From administrative compliance to team/organizational learning
   • Focus on process: how outcomes are being achieved, where, for whom

3. Routinize use of mixed methods
   • Embed array of research tools into the daily life of projects (Rao et al 2017)
   • Types of problems should map onto types of evidence
   • Understanding causal mechanisms ‘inside the black box’

4. Complex programs / policies only as good as their implementation
   • To build organization capability, focus on tracking nature of ‘problems solved’
Quick case study revisited...

A recent (famous) RCT published in a highly prestigious journal evaluated a program in an African country seeking to both enhance employment opportunities and empower local communities. The authors found “positive short-run effects on local public goods and economic outcomes, but no evidence for sustained impacts on collective action, decision making, or the involvement of marginalized groups, suggesting that the intervention did not durably reshape local institutions.” (emphasis added)

What does one conclude from this study?

That without attending to the distinctive analytical features of complex interventions, and relying on ‘rigorous methods’ alone as the basis for drawing broad policy conclusions, all sorts of unwarranted conclusions can be drawn. A comprehensive, fit-for-purpose theory of change must accompany any attempt to draw inferences and make generalizations.
Thank You

**Contact Detail**