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POLICY BRIEF

Evidence in Development Policymaking and Practice

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Decision-makers in development want to ensure that they put resources into strategies and projects that make the biggest difference. And for that, they need evidence. But what is evidence? Much of the focus is on scientific evidence, which can be very valuable and useful, but also has its limitations. Different kinds of evidence exist without a general hierarchy to evaluate them. The choice of method, and hence the type of evidence, follows from the questions being asked and the context. The crux is not so much what evidence is, but how it is approached. Decision-makers should employ an inclusive approach to defining evidence. The evidence principles developed by Bond are a promising approach.

Why evidence matters

The aim of international development is to improve lives around the world, but how do we know which projects work and which do not? Resources are scarce and development needs are tremendous, so it is essential that we channel support effectively. And for that, we need evidence.

Development policy makers want to ensure that they put resources into strategies and projects that make the biggest difference. But the reality is, decisions are often made with unreliable evidence or even no evidence at all, which increases the risk of promoting projects that have little positive impact or are actually counter-productive. This paper outlines an approach to help decision-makers assess evidence quality within the real-world restrictions of time, budget and feasibility.

What is evidence?

Evidence can be defined as "the available body of information indicating whether an opinion or proposition is true or valid" (Oxford English Dictionary). To achieve a minimum level of qual-

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ity, evidence should contain empirical information, be based on trustworthy sources and be systematically collected and processed (Marshall 2018). On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear how complex the evidence question is.

Typical evidence questions

Evidence can be examined from different perspectives. On one hand, development policymakers and practitioners are interested in understanding and quantifying the impact of interventions. Useful impact evidence comprises data and information that provide support for or against a cause-and-effect hypothesis in an intervention's theory of change (Bond 2015). For example, a development agency may fund the training of primary education teachers on the theory that better-trained teachers will promote better learning by students. In this case, evidence could be comparing the test scores of students before and after the training intervention in schools where teachers received training and in schools where teachers did not.

On the other hand, development actors increasingly also understand the importance of establishing a plausible explanation of why and how something is happening if they are to use evidence for improving aid interventions. Causation without explanation is insufficient (Bond 2015). Referring to the above example, evidence could be for instance the results of qualitative interviews with the students about their teachers after the training, aiming at understanding the underlying factors that explain diverging behavior and incentive patterns between and within each of the two teacher cohorts.

Hierarchy of evidence?

There is an assumed hierarchy that scientific evidence—drawing upon empirical or theoretical findings, objective, replicable and generalizable—is the best. Much of the focus in evidence-informed policymaking and practice is indeed on scientific evidence. However, scientific evidence is not necessarily the best kind of evidence in all contexts and for all purposes. It can be very valuable and useful, but has its limitations.

For example, distinguishing between high and low quality scientific evidence is not always self-evident (Mayne et al. 2018). Further, just having evidence of effects per se tells us little about the social desirability or meaningfulness of that which is being measured. And scientific evidence, particularly quantitative evidence, presents itself to be value neutral, technical and non-political, but it is always shaped by the social, cultural and normative context (Baud et al. 2019).

In addition, scientific evidence may not be available. Development organizations are faced with resource constraints (time, money, expertise) and the need to get fast results in order to be effective. Organizations are often simply not in the position to "wait for" scientific evidence to be produced—decisions need to be made based on data that can be realistically gathered within

a given time frame. They have to be able to work with "lean data", i.e. evidence that may not meet all standards of an academic study, but is good enough to serve as the basis for decisions (Marschall 2018).

Other categories of evidence can also be useful for informing development policy and practice (Baud et al. 2019; Ward 2017). Social evidence, for instance, is based on the aggregated experiences and perceptions of project beneficiaries and other civil society members, communicating with each other about their ideas and reflections and seeking change through petitions and manifestos. Practical-technical evidence comprises know-how, common sense, experience, expertise or professional judgments. These types of evidence lie outside the restricted scope of the scientific sphere.

Evidence is not self-evident

Evidence "is seldom, if ever, self-evident. It requires the expertise, experience and judgment of its users to interpret it and decide how to use it to address the problem in hand." (Davies 2016). The crux is therefore not so much what evidence is, but how it is approached. The choice of method, and hence the type of evidence, follows from the questions being asked and the context (Stern et al. 2012). Researchers, practitioners and policymakers should dedicate more attention and resources to building an inclusive approach to practice-based evidence. "By basing

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decision-making on many ways of knowing and many sources of evidence, we can avoid the false choice between relying on random assignment experiments versus relying on good intentions, ideology, and a handful of anecdotes" (Smyth and Schorr 2009: 21).

Development professionals face multiple challenges in trying to assemble, understand and use evidence in their decision-making processes. Different kinds of evidence exist without a general hierarchy to evaluate them, and the real-world context of development cooperation imposes serious constraints on what kind of evidence can be generated. In the face of these challenges, a set of evidence guidelines can help development professionals make decisions on how to define and evaluate different types of evidence.

Defining evidence through principles

There are different attempts to systematically define evidence. However, these are mostly too complex or vague, and are as a result not easily applicable in practice for decision-makers. The evidence principles developed by Bond (box 1) are among the more promising approaches to defining and evaluating evidence. The principles do not provide an exact definition of evidence for any given context or question, but rather aim to facilitate decision-makers in developing a "good enough" approach towards the best available evidence.

Bond's approach assesses the quality of evidence against five principles: voice and inclusion, appropriateness, triangulation, contribution, and transparency. For each principle, Bond provides a pre-defined checklist with four questions used to test the quality of the piece of evidence at hand. Each question is scored on a 1-4 scale, which helps with consistent scoring by describing what practice looks like at each of the four levels. The scores for each of the questions are then added up to arrive at an overall score for each principle, which is then assigned a degree of evidence quality (box 2).

Evidence can range, for example, from the findings of a rigorous impact study to the findings of most-significant-change stories. For each piece of evidence, decision-makers at policy and practice levels would, according to their specific needs, score each principle and hence establish the overall quality of their respective body of evidence. By default each principle is considered equally important (20%), but the weighting can be modified according to context and question. This allows each organization to establish its own definition of evidence most appropriate to its operational realities, and transparently communicate that definition when presenting the evidence to be used in decision-making.

While this methodology cannot resolve all the challenges that may arise related to prioritizing definitional components of evidence, uncertain quality or contradictory evidence, it does offer one systematic and practical approach to evaluate evidence. Moreover, it facilitates a participatory learning approach to defining evidence with knowledgeable individuals—including policymakers, practitioners and researchers—applying reasonable judgments based on evidence from research, theory and experience.

To ensure the principles facilitate decision-makers across the organization in assembling and appraising the right evidence at the right time, decision-makers at policy level would have to institutionalize the principles by embedding them, among other things, in quality assurance frameworks and standard operating procedures of project appraisal and approval. The use of evidence in decision-making is discussed in the next brief.

Box 1 – Evidence principles

Voice and Inclusion - evidence presents beneficiaries' views on the effects of the intervention, and it identifies who has been affected and how

Appropriateness - evidence is based on justifiable methods given the nature of the intervention and purpose of the assessment

Triangulation - conclusions about the intervention's effects are made by using a mix of methods, data sources, and perspectives

Contribution - evidence shows how change happened and explains how the intervention influenced it

Transparency - evidence is open about the data sources and methods used, the results achieved, its strengths and limitations

Source: Bond 2018.

Box 2 – Scoring evidence principles

Overall score	Evidence quality
4 – 6	Evidence is **weak**
7 – 10	Evidence meets **minimum standard**
11 - 13	Evidence meets **good standard**
14 – 16	Evidence meets **high standard**

Source: Bond 2018.

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Photo

P. 1: Aerial view of northern Mali. UN Photo / Marco Dormino

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