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Decisions affecting the sustainability of social programs: How much are they based on evidence?

R. Savaya, S. Spiro

Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

Every year, countless new social welfare programs are piloted worldwide. The logical assumption would be that programs that meet an identified need and prove effective will continue to be funded. This assumption is inherent in the notion of evidence based policy.

But how much do policy makers really base their decisions on the evidence? And, if not, on what do they base them?

The paper will address these questions by presenting the findings of an in-depth analysis of the funding decisions with respect to six innovative programs in Israel, only three of which continued to be funded after the "pilot" stage. The initial funding for all of these programs came from two foundations that support innovative programs in the fields of education and social welfare. For each there was an understanding (in some cases in writing) that, if the program proved effective funding would be continued by the appropriate government ministry. Towards the end of the initial funding period, all the programs were evaluated by external evaluators.

The analysis was conducted through case studies of the six programs. Data for the cases studies were collected from: (a) in depth interviews with program staff, officers of the foundations and representatives of the relevant government ministries; (b) the evaluation reports; and (c) other relevant documentation.

The paper concludes with suggestions for steps that can be taken to increase the chances of survival of needed and effective programs where government policy decisions are not based on evidence.