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WHY DO MANY EVALUATIONS HAVE A POSITIVE BIAS? WHY SHOULD WE WORRY?

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The two worlds of development impact evaluation

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- The two worlds of development impact evaluations
 - ▣ Rigorous quantitative impact evaluations
 - Perhaps as little as 10% of all impact evaluations
 - ▣ Less rigorous impact evaluations conducted under budget, time, data and political constraints
- Almost all of the literature focuses on rigorous statistical evaluations
- Difficult to find any guidance on how to strengthen less statistically rigorous evaluations

Typical positively biased impact evaluations

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- Commissioned towards the end of the project
- No baseline data
- Consultants only spend a few weeks in the field
- Mainly meet with project beneficiaries and implementing agencies
 - ▣ Most feedback is positive
- Little information on people not benefiting from project or who are worse off
- No counterfactual: implicitly assumed all changes can be attributed to the project

Typical biased impact evaluation [continued]

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- All of these factors mean that most information comes from groups who benefit from the project
 - ▣ or from implementing agencies [who also benefit]
- More difficult (and expensive) to collect information from groups who are excluded or who do not benefit
 - ▣ and little incentive to make the effort to reach them
- Consultants also tend to put a positive spin on their findings
- **So many evaluations show development programs in the most positive light**

Why does this matter?

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- Many evaluation reports have a systematic positive bias. As a result:
 - Agencies may continue to fund programs that produce less benefits than claimed
 - Limited resources available to test new program models
 - Agencies fail to reach out to under-represented groups
 - Failure to identify and address negative effects – often quite serious
 - Agencies fail to comply with their mandate “Do no harm”

Why does this happen?

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- Time, budget and data constraints
- Institutional factors
 - Evaluation has low priority
 - Positive assessment of agency interventions
 - So why question the methodology?
 - Evaluation staff are often administrators handling large numbers of evaluation contracts
 - Poorly defined consultant RFPs/TORs
 - No quality assurance procedure
 - Consultants learn their methodology will not be rigorously assessed

Sources of positive bias in “strong” quantitative evaluation designs

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- Inadequate coverage of sampling frame
- Quantitative data collection methods cannot capture sensitive data
- Key sectors of the population not interviewed
 - ▣ only “household head”, landowners etc
- Limited construct validity of unidimensional quantitative outcome indicators
- Many quantitative designs cannot capture unanticipated (often negative) outcomes

How to control for positive bias?

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- Need to recognize poor quality of evaluation data on which policies are based
- Strengthen evaluation TOR
 - ▣ Require definition of a counterfactual
 - ▣ Require that non-beneficiaries are interviewed
 - ▣ Require use of broader range of key informants not involved in project
 - ▣ Define minimum standards for data collection – including focus groups
- Require use of mixed method designs
- Build-in quality assurance procedures

- More realistic time and budget
- Greater use of local consultants to prepare evaluation design and fieldwork
- Assess the adequacy of the sampling frame and take measures to strengthen

Contact information

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Social Impact (SI) is a global social enterprise dedicated to helping international agencies, civil society and governments become more effective agents of positive social and economic change. For more information on SI's work to improve development effectiveness visit:

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