

Rigorous Evidence: Key To Progress Against World Poverty?

A policy forum on the innovative evidence-based approach of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the U.S. government's major new vehicle for international development assistance

Wednesday, October 29, 2008, 12:00-3:00 p.m.
1301 K Street, NW, Suite 450 West, Washington DC
Lunch will be provided.

Background and Agenda:

1. The problem:

Development agencies and other organizations spend tens of billions of dollars annually to help the world's poor, with little basis in evidence about which strategies are effective and which are not.

In 2006 the Evaluation Gap Working Group, convened by the Center for Global Development with support from the Gates and Hewlett Foundations, issued an influential report on what is known about what works in development assistance. The Group, which conducted a comprehensive assessment of the evaluation literature for projects funded by UN agencies, multilateral development banks, and developing country governments, summarized its main conclusion in Congressional testimony as follows: *“For most types of programs, a body of scientific evidence about effectiveness is lacking. For almost all projects currently in operation or in the pipeline, virtually no credible information will be generated about program impact.”* Citing the well-known Chinese proverb about teaching a man to fish, the Group concluded, *“We do not know how to fish. We are not learning how to fish. We have little hope of teaching others how to fish.”*

2. The Millennium Challenge Corporation's (MCC) evidence-based approach:

MCC, established by Congress in 2004 to administer a major new U.S. development assistance effort, has undertaken a concerted strategy to address this evaluation gap.

MCC's strategy – sponsoring rigorous independent evaluations of its funded projects, and making the results public in a transparent and timely way so as to inform policy decisions – will be the subject of the October 29 policy forum. The forum will be hosted by the nonprofit, nonpartisan Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, in collaboration with MCC; participants will include leaders of the development policy and research community. The forum's purpose is to (i) discuss MCC's evidence-based approach, including some initial results and MCC's new web-based effort to make the results publicly accessible; (ii) explore whether the MCC approach can help spark rapid, evidence-driven progress in development assistance, similar to that which has transformed other fields such as medicine and U.S. welfare policy, and (iii) to seek input and suggestions on the approach from forum participants.

3. The opportunity:

An important departure from past practice, MCC's approach – and parallel initiatives at the World Bank and elsewhere – could help spark rapid, evidence-driven progress in development policy.

In the exceptional cases where rigorous evaluations have been conducted in development assistance, they have identified a *few* strategies that are highly effective in improving the lives of the world's

poor. Although rare, the very existence of these research-proven strategies suggests that a concerted effort by development agencies and others to build the number of such strategies, and spur their widespread use, could have a major impact on world poverty and other important outcomes. Illustrative examples of these strategies include:

- **PROGRESA program (Mexico)** – provides cash transfers to poor families contingent on their children’s enrollment in school and visits to health clinics. In a rigorous randomized trial with a two-year follow-up, the program was shown to increase high school enrollment by 10%, reduce incidence of illness in children age 0-5 by 12%, increase physical growth of children age 1-3 by 16%, and reduce the poverty rate by 17%, compared to a control group.
- **Primary School De-worming Project (Kenya)** – provides students with low-cost drugs (\$0.49 per student per year) to eliminate parasitic worms. In a rigorous randomized trial with a one-year follow-up, the program was shown to reduce the percentage of children with moderate-to-heavy worm infections by 50%, and reduce school absences by 25%, compared to a control group.

4. **Meeting Agenda:**

12:00 Lunch (provided) and Welcome

12:10-1:30 Panel 1: MCC’s Evidence-Based Approach – Key To Progress?

Speaker presentations, followed by 30 minutes Q&A and open discussion.

Introductory Remarks:

Jon Baron, Executive Director, Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy

Speakers:

Franck Wiebe, Chief Economist, Millennium Challenge Corporation

Ruth Levine, Vice President for Programs and Operations, Center for Global Development

Discussant:

Mark Lopes, Senior Policy Advisor, Office of Senator Menendez (Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on International Development)

1:30-1:40 Break

1:40-3:00 Panel 2: Can evaluations build scientifically-valid knowledge about “what works” that is of policy importance? Examples from development policy and other fields

Speaker presentations, followed by 30 minutes Q&A and open discussion.

Speakers:

Rachel Glennerster, Executive Director, Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab at M.I.T.

Ron Haskins, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

Dan Levy, Lecturer in Public Policy, Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government

3:00 Adjourn