

# Evaluation for Transparent Accountability: A Big Issue that can no longer be avoided

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# The Accountability of Foundations

Fiscal accountability aside, the aim of foundations is:

- (1) to Improve the lives of program recipients,
- (2) to demonstrate such improvements have or have not happened because of individual program efforts, and
- (3) to use evaluation methods for assessing program impact that “meet transparent and defensible standards”

Evaluation can help with other foundation tasks too, but this is its accountability function

# What are “Transparent and Defensible” Standards?

- Subject of great debate in the USA and many NW European countries; no fixed consensus across all of society, BUT
- In the public sector and many evaluation forums, the battle is being slowly won by the highest standards of science – the use of random assignment experiments.
- It is the only method allowed into some inventories of effective practices, and is weighted most heavily in others
- But some agencies and offices within agencies quietly resist this march, contending that their programs do not lend themselves to random assignment

# In Private Sector Foundations?

- Some (but not all) smaller foundations reflect the government and scientific preference for random assignment experiments
- Larger foundations do experiments if they can, but do not put them on a pedestal for assessing impact, BUT
- Their standards of impact assessment have nonetheless changed due to the debate about standards and the role of random assignment.

# More Sensitivity now to:

- *Impossibility of Avoiding Impact Assessment* and using weak evaluation designs to avoid true accountability
- *The need for an Evaluation Policy* that includes a stance on experiments, even if evaluation policy eventually chosen is to be eclectic about method choice for accountability
- *Greater Realization of the Inadequacies for Impact Assessment of* (a) case studies based on expert judgments, site visits, interviews and testimonials; (b) surveys in which folks report on impact; (c) simple quantitative designs based on pretest-posttest changes without comparison groups or based on comparisons between very different kinds of groups; and (d) complex quantitative modeling studies that require many untested assumptions

# More Sensitivity now to

- *Limitations of Design-Based Alternatives to Random Assignment*, such as interrupted time series, regression-discontinuity, matching designs
- *Government and journalists give more weight to impact statements* from foundations if based on random assignment. If you want publicity, do experiments.
- *Can foundations afford to ignore the social movement to place random assignment far ahead of its alternatives?* It is more than just a technical matter. In these new times, do you want to develop a policy about how to do serious impact assessment?