Annette N. Brown
Deputy Director and Washington Office Head, 3ie

What is the key role of independent impact evaluations (IE) in international development?

I would like to focus on the word independent to highlight an advantage that is often missed. That is, a key role of having impact evaluations independently funded, rather than funded through the M&E budget of individual projects, is that the impact evaluations can be targeted to delivering high-value answers rather than clustered around high-cost programs. I was giving a presentation on evidence gaps for peace-building programs recently, and one participant commented that some of the more interesting new programs are actually small interventions and are therefore unlikely to be evaluated using impact evaluation. Independent funding and commissioning of impact evaluations can provide the opportunities to learn from those small interventions, which may turn out to be highly cost effective. Even if the budget of an impact evaluation is larger than the budget of a specific program being evaluated, the learning can benefit many implementing agencies in many countries.

The development landscape keeps changing. Where is IE heading and what can be observed as major trends compared to a decade ago?

I see implementing agencies and researchers using impact evaluations to answer a wider range of questions. For example, a greater proportion of studies are within-treatment variations used to test program design questions as opposed to more traditional “did the program work” impact evaluation questions. I also think that more researchers and evaluators are grounding their impact evaluations in theory, although the ability to do that is always constrained by whether the program implementers use theory in their program design.

1 The opinions expressed in this interview are those of Annette Brown and do not necessarily represent the views of 3ie, its members, or its Board of Commissioners.
The true challenge in institutionalising IE is for it to remain relevant and be put to good use by all stakeholders. What is still needed to fully institutionalise IE in Africa?

I think that fully institutionalising IE is still a challenge internationally. Part of the answer is indicated by your next question. That is, IE evidence needs to become a key component of funding and allocation decisions and of program design, and not just a way of measuring results after the fact. I do think the results agenda has benefited IE and the culture of evidence in some ways, but IE can play a much bigger role for learning than for accountability. Government and other implementing agencies need to develop and adapt policies and processes so that evidence is required up front when programs are being designed, proposed, funded, staffed, and implemented. Of course, capacity building is also part of the answer, on both the user side and the producer side.

Evaluation lessons learned are often not taken into account by implementing agencies when designing or implementing a program. How can we make better use of lessons learned?

We have to find ways to make the evidence from impact evaluations more usable. Part of what is needed is to make the evidence more understandable – translating the research findings into understandable policy implications. While we strongly encourage researchers and evaluators to take responsibility for this, this approach has its limitations. Researchers may consciously or unconsciously have a conflict of interest in representing the findings of their work. And not every good evaluator is a good communicator. So I feel we need to complement this (still very important) approach with third-party assistance in translating findings and deriving policy implications.

Perhaps a bigger challenge to making evidence from impact evaluations more usable is increasing what we call “external validity” from individual studies. External validity is the extent to which we can apply findings from one impact evaluation to other situations. The easiest way to increase external validity is to incorporate qualitative and other factual analysis along with a careful process evaluation into impact evaluations. The detailed information about how a program was implemented and how it achieved impact (or did not) helps other users to better analyse what should and should not be applied to other settings and populations.

Impact evaluations that clearly test something about international development theory also tend to have greater external validity. The particular program may not be relevant to others, but evidence supporting (or not) certain theories helps other program designers identify promising theories of change. Another way to increase external validity from impact evaluations is to carefully synthesise the evidence from multiple studies using systematic review methodologies. If meta-analysis is possible, we learn whether the evidence in aggregate supports (or not) an intervention. High-quality systematic reviews also explore heterogeneous outcomes allowing us to learn whether and how context matters, which guides how the evidence can be applied to other situations.

What advice would you give institutions that are seeking to innovate and leapfrog ahead in IE?

Start small and learn by doing. If an agency does not have the resources or capacity to undertake a long-term evaluation of a large program, it should explore more targeted programming questions using impact evaluation techniques. A smaller study that produces useful evidence in a short
period of time can both build capacity for commissioning and managing impact evaluations and produce a demonstration effect to help attract resources for more evaluations. And stay involved. It can be easy to commission studies from experienced evaluators and then wait for the answers, but agencies will learn more about IE by staying closely involved in the studies. These lessons will help agencies make the best uses of IE resources going forward.

**How can the development community enhance the effectiveness of impact evaluations?**

By demanding high quality, transparent impact evaluations delivered sooner. Few would argue with the claim that peer review is a key ingredient to the production of high-quality research, yet a recent study of mine with colleagues (Cameron et al., 2015) shows that the time between end line data collection and journal publication for international development impact evaluations in the social sciences is six years. Six years. Does this mean that policymakers do not see the evidence until then? No. Most researchers report that they share the findings with policymakers right away. But if we believe peer review is important for quality, why should policy makers be expected to use non peer-reviewed evidence?

Part of the solution needs to be pressure on social science journals to speed up publication processes. Health journals do much better and can provide some lessons. But part of the solution needs to be creating incentives for researchers to write up and publish their evaluations as soon as possible. One way to change these incentives is to require that data be made public within a short period of time after end line data are collected.

Other indicators of high quality that implementing agencies can look for are transparency and robustness. The first step in research transparency is registration; that is, the process by which researchers and evaluators enter information about their hypotheses, data collection plans, and analytical methods into a public registry before they initiate their evaluations. Public registries can serve as a useful tool for ensuring that implementing agencies and evaluators have the same expectations and understanding about planned evaluations. 3ie sponsors a registry for international development impact evaluations (RIDIE) that accepts a range of impact evaluation methods. The robustness of a completed study can be checked through internal replication; that is, when an independent researcher uses the same data to explore the same evaluation question both by reproducing the original results and conducting re-analysis. Implementing agencies should prioritise evidence from evaluations that have been validated in this way.

---

**PROFILE OF THE AUTHOR**

Annette N. Brown is a Deputy Director of 3ie and heads 3ie’s Washington office. She oversees 3ie’s impact evaluation services, including the registry, repository, and replication programs; 3ie’s HIV and AIDS evidence programs; the evidence for peacebuilding initiative; 3ie membership development and services; and she also leads several of 3ie’s professional services projects.

Prior to joining 3ie, Annette held executive and senior management positions at several development implementers. Earlier in her career, Annette was Assistant Professor of Economics at Western Michigan University and held research positions at the World Bank and the Stockholm Institute for Transition Economics. She holds a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Michigan.