

# Conference on Impact Measurement in Development Aid

April 17<sup>th</sup> 2009, 2-6pm

Graduates' Memorial Building, Trinity College Dublin

Hosted by the Institute for International Integration Studies in collaboration with the Trinity  
International Development Initiative (TIDI)

## Conference Proceedings

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### Attendance:

Approximately 60 people; academics, development practitioners and others.

### Proceedings

#### **2pm: Welcome Address.**

Prof. Matthews welcomed the group to Trinity College and to the conference. He stressed the importance of evaluation, including impact measurement in the development context, particularly in the current economic climate when justification of expenditure is becoming increasingly important. Prof. Matthews stated his hope that the conference would mark the beginning of a partnership between development academics and practitioners in the area of impact measurement. Prof. Matthews then introduced Michael King and Pedro Vicente, the conference conveners.

#### **2.10pm: Aims and Context of the Conference: A New Initiative on Aid Effectiveness.**

Dr. Vicente explained that a group of development academics at TCD were engaging with a new initiative on aid effectiveness. He emphasized that the focus was on the evaluation of specific projects in the field rather than aid programmes and that the approach would be particularly suited to addressing socioeconomic outcomes. Development academics can offer expertise in measuring variables using the latest scientific methods available with a focus on precision which is the foundation of good research. In addition they can offer their own channels to disseminate the results of research. Dr. Vicente said that the group of academics was concerned with methods of measurement and the establishment of causal relationships in order to grow knowledge in this area. He stated that academics were keen to engage with development projects on the ground. Dr. Vicente introduced the speakers and welcomed them to the conference.

### **2.20-3.10pm: Can Post-Conflict Development Aid Strengthen Community Cohesion? Evidence from Liberia.**

Prof. Humphreys introduced himself and his research interests, which include governance, violence, conflict and community organization. He stated his focus on the important issue of establishing causal relationships. He stressed the importance of finding overlapping research questions that were of interest to both the academic and development practitioner communities in facilitating partnerships. Prof. Humphreys gave a brief overview of the methodological considerations involved in establishing causality, emphasizing the need for suitable control groups. He then presented three case studies, drawn from his work in Liberia and Sierra Leone, to illustrate three research approaches; observational, quasi-experimental and experimental. In describing the observational approach to research with ex-combatants in Sierra Leone, Prof. Humphreys illustrated how, not finding evidence of the effects of a programme is not the same as finding evidence of no programme effects. The lack of control group in his first research example meant that the programme could not conclusively be said to be effective. In the example of a quasi-experimental approach, taken from a victim support programme in Aceh, Prof. Humphreys highlighted the importance of choosing the most suitable research method at the most appropriate level of analysis in order to gain specific information on the desired variables. The third case study was drawn from a post-conflict, community-driven reconstruction project in Liberia. In this example of experimental research, there was the opportunity to employ good research practice which included: involvement of the project administrators in the research design, use of quantitative, qualitative and behavioural measures, random assignment to different treatment groups to control for variables such as gender, measurement of effects at different points in time. These measures proved helpful in establishing the impact of different variables, in this case aspects of the project context, on its effectiveness. Prof. Humphreys, while advocating this type of research approach, recognized that the real-world can sometimes put constraints on methodology. The audience raised questions around the composition of the samples used, the sustainability of changes noted, the generalisability of results, the source of funding and the independence of the research. Prof. Humphreys cited a number of useful resources including: The Poverty Action Lab at MIT, IPA at Yale, Centre for field experimentation in the political economy of development at Columbia, EGAP supported by Hewlett, 3IE.

### **3.10-4.00pm: Votes and Violence: Evidence from an Informational Campaign in Nigeria.**

Dr. Vicente presented a case study of his work with Action Aid on an anti-violence informational campaign around the Nigerian elections. He described the campaign which used a variety of different means of communications. Dr. Vicente presented the research questions used and talked through the research design which included a randomized campaign and targeted different representative samples. He outlined the sampling process and the outcome variables chosen. In terms of analysis, he presented the econometric equations used. Dr. Vicente highlighted the lessons relevant to policy-makers from this particular study. He mentioned some considerations in this type of study such as self-selection among the groups, the role of expectations in interpreting results and cost-effectiveness and practicality of this type of study. Further information on this research can be found at [www.iig.ox.ac.uk](http://www.iig.ox.ac.uk).

### **4.20-5.10pm: Does Digital Divide or Provide? The Impact of Cell Phones on Grain Markets in Niger.**

Prof. Aker presented her research which she differentiated from the previous presentations saying that it measured the impact of a naturally occurring technological event – the introduction of cell phones and networks - rather than a specific NGO intervention. This was a quasi-experimental study which compared treatment and control groups but did not use randomized assignment as this was not possible in this case. The study showed how an increase in cell phones led to less variety in price dispersion at grain markets and to welfare gains for consumers, farmers and traders among other outcomes. Prof. Aker emphasized how research such as this, and other examples, such as Project ABC which looks at the impact of cell phones on literacy attainment, can usefully inform policy on the use of technology and the sharing of information. The audience asked questions about the effects of cell phones on consumers, about the type of analysis used and about the importance of traders and monopolies in the research scenario. Prof. Aker's presentation, and a working paper expanding upon her research, are available as links below.

**5.10-6pm: Discussion – Ireland and the Development Aid Impact Evaluation: Opportunities for Systematic Measurement and Precise Estimation? Chair: Michael King**

**Marie Gaarder, Director, International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3IE):**

3IE is an organization that aims to enhance development effectiveness through evidence-based policy-making. In its work, 3IE aims to increase understanding of whether there is an effect and whether this effect can be attributed to the intervention in question. Gaarder stated that quality impact evaluation should be both rigorous and policy-relevant pointing to the potential synergies between academics and development practitioners. 3IE produces a journal of development effectiveness, it also provides research funding and a variety of information and networking services. More information can be found below and at the following link: [www.3ieimpact.org](http://www.3ieimpact.org).

**Fintan Farrelly, Irish Aid:**

Fintan Farrelly from Irish Aid welcomed the occasion of the conference and the growing partnership between academics and development practitioners. He referred to the OECD's network on aid evaluation as a point of reference for those interested in the subject. He outlined some stages in the evaluation process from designing Terms of Reference and research questions to evaluations and reporting. Fintan Farrelly also said that debate on the use of different methodologies would be welcomed and that there was room for alternatives to the randomized control trial, such as case studies and other means. The key was that the methodology should be rigorously designed and appropriate to the type of research being done.

**Audience questions and discussion:**

*How do evaluation methods relate to wider political processes and policy?*

Different levels of analysis are undertaken – at the macro and micro levels. Researchers are often approached to undertake research for the Government. In the past, there may have been a University-based perception that policy work was not sufficiently rigorous and also that there was a danger of policy research becoming formulaic, however there have been changes in this regard and many researchers are now keen to contribute to policy formulation.

*How do the methodologies presented at this conference link to other government and NGO methods? Can these methodologies be applied to government programmes?*

A distinction is drawn between the evaluation of projects and programmes. The methodologies presented here are best used in the case of projects with a fairly narrow scope as they are quite rigorous and specific and because of the need for projects to adhere to certain criteria to ensure sufficient statistical power. Alternative methodologies may be more suitable for high level policy studies.

*What's new about 3IE?*

3IE brings a new focus on rigour to the area of impact evaluation.

*Are there ethical issues that arise as a result of withholding interventions from control groups?*

The starting point of research should be to do no harm. Donor coordination is an important issue in ensuring that the allocation of and benefits of treatments are maximized. The importance of taking responsibility for the effects of interventions in the form of research or otherwise was stressed.

*What will be the impact of budget cuts in overseas development assistance on the work of this initiative and similar initiatives?*

Budget cuts and the reduction in available funds will require an even greater need for evaluation and will place a new value on the importance of proving the worth of a project and learning from experience. Researchers can provide an important function in challenging development philosophy and practice.

*How can the discussion between academics and practitioners progress and what barriers exist to communications?*

The motivations of academics and practitioners may differ somewhat. Concerns were expressed that research would measure only those impacts that are evident and capturable and that it may miss some of the more detailed and relevant information. Both parties emphasized the importance of taking responsibility for the changes that may be caused by interventions including research and the results of research, as well as the moral obligations held to the populations involved in research.

*How do data and the wisdom of on-the-ground experience sit side by side?*

The point was raised that there is a need for a research stream to question the current research paradigms as they relate to development. The importance of community involvement in research was emphasized, from the design right through the process to the dissemination of results among the communities and ensuring that they benefit from any progress made.

### **Conclusion:**

Michael King closed the conference, thanking both speakers and audience for their contributions. He stated his hope that partnerships between academics and practitioners would grow and said that the academic group working on the topic of impact evaluation at Trinity College were open to suggestions about how to work with practitioners in this area.