

Authors

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Request to share experiences in explaining evaluation

When we return to the US after months or years of working in the field, we often experience "reverse culture shock" - aspects of US culture seem surprising and unusual to us. I felt this when explaining "What is IPA?" to family members and friends, and realized I needed an entirely new approach.

In Peru, it takes several examples to illustrate why we use randomized control trials. I talk about the need for a control group, and why individuals or village banks or schools that will receive a particular treatment need to be selected randomly. In other words, we use a methodology that is new to our partners, and it is important that they understand it before we launch a study.

But... I have never needed to explain that some development interventions work and some do not. Our partners look for ways to reach poorer families, or get people to maintain savings accounts, or get students (and teachers!) to actually show up in schools, and they recognize that research helps them figure out what is the best way to do that. It is obvious to everyone in Peru that aid organizations, NGOs, and government agencies often spend money on projects that do not actually help.

And then, at a dinner party a few weeks ago in New York City, it dawned on me that it had not occurred to my lawyer and investment banker buddies that evaluation was even necessary. Not to assess whether there is corruption in aid delivery (though preventing corruption is of course important as well) but to know whether what is being delivered is at all worthwhile.

So my question for you US-based folks - is this something you need to explain to friends and family? Especially to those who do not work in development? And if so, what analogies do you use?

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