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Working Paper 2015-4

Methods of Measuring the Impacts of Social Policy in Political, Economic and Social Dimensions

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prepared for the UNRISD project on
Towards Universal Social Security in Emerging
Economies: Process, Institutions and Actors

February 2015



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Acronyms

IV	Instrumental Variables
LEAP	Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty
LEWIE	Local Economy-wide Impact Evaluations
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PSM	Propensity Score Matching
QCA	Qualitative Comparative Analysis
RCT	Randomized Control Trial
RDD	Regression Discontinuity Design

Summary

Over the past decade the world has seen a sea change in the role of evidence informing social policy design and implementation. In the social protection sector in particular, rigorous quantitative impact assessments have changed how policy analysts and implementers measure success. Mainstream evaluations increasingly rely on experimental approaches, and sometimes quasi-experiments, requiring important compromises. Given the complexity of many critical policy questions, evaluation designers often face a trade-off between ensuring the most rigorous attribution of impact and illuminating the critical policy questions that policy makers are asking. An evaluation approach that balances the prerequisites for analytical rigour with the demands of policy makers for relevant answers is required to design and implement more effective social policies and strategies.

This paper reviews current impact assessment methods and builds on Amartya Sen's framework of comprehensive and culmination outcomes to identify elements of a comprehensive framework that enables a systems approach to the analysis of social policy. Discussing how mainstream evaluation methods have assessed the outcomes of social security systems, the underlying assumptions of these methods and the associated challenges for the realization of comprehensive outcomes, the paper argues that inclusion of the processes, institutions and actors of social policy interventions that importantly affect programme objectives—along with the actually realized outcomes—should be integrated into a comprehensive approach to better inform social policies.

The emerging framework recognizes the value of a cross-sectoral analysis that studies social, political and economic aspects across a variety of dimensions. It recognizes the importance of both short- and long-term analysis within a policy environment driven by a multiplicity of strategic objectives. In particular, the framework explicitly recognizes that the impact of one sectoral intervention on a specific outcome depends critically on the related interventions across a range of sectors. A comprehensive evaluation approach should inform the optimal balancing of multiple interventions to achieve a range of joint outcomes.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 1 introduces the concepts of culmination and comprehensive outcomes, following a framework proposed by Sen. Section 2 discusses the current mainstream impact evaluation methods for social protection. Several key aspects of a comprehensive evaluation that are not present in current mainstream methods are identified. Section 3 discusses in further depth the features of a comprehensive evaluation, and identifies steps that are already being taken toward a comprehensive evaluation. Emphasizing that inclusion of the processes, institutions and actors of social policy interventions that affect programme objectives in important ways—along with the actually realized outcomes—is central to alternative approaches to expand the scope of the assessment, section 4 concludes with the exposition of elements of a framework for comprehensive evaluation, and discusses future challenges and opportunities.

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Introduction

Over the past decade the world has seen a sea change in the role of evidence informing social policy design and implementation. In the social protection sector in particular, rigorous quantitative impact assessments have changed how policy analysts and implementers measure success. However, a growing emphasis on methodological rigour has crowded out a more comprehensive approach to evidence-building, thereby creating gaps in the evidence base policy makers require to design and implement more effective strategies. Mainstream evaluations increasingly rely on experimental approaches, and sometimes quasi-experiments, requiring important compromises. An evaluation approach that better informs policy development would balance the prerequisites for analytical rigour with the demands of policy makers for relevant answers.

Amartya Sen has distinguished comprehensive outcomes from culmination outcomes. In culmination outcomes the analysis is confined to accounting for the consequences of determined inputs, with little consideration of the interactions, interests or unforeseen influence of actors and institutions throughout the process. Comprehensive outcomes, Sen (2009) contrasts, comprise the process, institutions and actors, as well as the outcomes of their actions. The application of this concept of comprehensive outcomes to the analysis of social security systems enables the expansion of the scope of assessment of social security systems.

This paper discusses how mainstream evaluation methods have assessed the outcomes of social security systems, exploring the underlying assumptions of these methods and how they create challenges for the realization of comprehensive outcomes. The processes, institutions and actors of social policy interventions affect programme objectives in important ways along with the actually realized outcomes. While a number of existing evaluation approaches offer potential to improve the measurement of comprehensive outcomes, more innovative work is required to better address the demands of policy makers and stakeholders who envision a proactive role for evidence in supporting better social policy.

In 1957 Campbell's foundational paper "Factors Relevant to the Validity of Experiments in Social Settings" (Campbell 1957) explored the concepts of internal and external validity as well as experimental and quasi-experimental design, laying the groundwork for the growth of randomized control trials (RCTs) that today some herald as the "gold standard" of social policy evaluation. Critics, however, point out that these quantitative impact assessments are often too limited, focusing on average, quantifiable effects while ignoring impact heterogeneity and important qualitative elements. Some of the most important developmental outcomes are difficult to quantify, and often evolve over a longer-term horizon than most RCTs encompass. Many important social policy questions cannot be reduced to experiments, and some experiments create conditions that policy makers reject for ethical, practical or political reasons.

This paper reviews current evaluation methods and builds on Sen's framework of comprehensive and culmination outcomes to identify elements of a comprehensive evaluation approach. The emerging framework recognizes the value of a cross-sectoral analysis which studies social, political and economic aspects across a variety of dimensions. It recognizes the importance of both short- and long-term analysis. The framework, for example, emphasizes linkages between social protection programme, sectors and institutions.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 1 introduces the concepts of culmination and comprehensive outcomes, following a framework proposed by Sen. Section 2 discusses the current mainstream impact evaluation methods for social protection. Several key aspects of a comprehensive evaluation that are not present in current mainstream methods are identified. Section 3 discusses in further depth the features of a comprehensive evaluation, and identifies steps that are already being taken toward a comprehensive evaluation. Section 4 concludes with the exposition of elements of a framework for comprehensive evaluation, and discusses future challenges and opportunities.

1. Comprehensive Versus Culmination Outcomes

Culmination outcomes rely on a clear itemization of inputs that, when applied to a given problem, produce certain measurable impacts (Arrow 2006). This is an attractive method for social policy design, as it enables policy makers to conceptualize fiscal, human and other resource inputs through a lens of applying a certain equation to a given problem. The increased demand for evidence-based social policy regularly reinforces this conceptualization by promoting more “scientifically rigorous” methods of policy study such as RCTs. RCTs are advantageous and often necessary methods for advancing clinical studies or for when the purpose of the study is constrained to the group under trial. These studies are often capable of attaining internal validity, and therein can empower critical impacts within the observed community (Deaton 2010). In the realm of social policy, however, an “internally valid” trial is only as informative as the borders of its own study. Without extensive—often very costly—replication of the trial across many communities, a social policy RCT cannot overcome the gap of external validity. Sen rejects the basis of reasoning on merely culmination outcomes, describing it as “ignoring the relevance of agencies, processes or relations” (Sen 2009: 217). Agents’ processes are relevant because the act of choosing a certain pathway to an outcome adds greater relevance and understanding to that outcome that is often ignored. This extends beyond an individual institution being responsive to its own systems and influences: “of course the institutions themselves can sensibly count as part of their realizations that come through them, but they can hardly be the entirety of what we need to concentrate on, since people’s lives are also involved”(Sen 2009: 82). This is Sen’s argument for social realizations, in which it is our responsibility to recognize the consequential connections that “relate freedoms to obligations” (Sen 2009: 347).

The importance of social realization and identifying the impacts of choice to a process extends to all areas of evidence-based reasoning. Sen describes this reasoning of comprehensive outcomes as holding “extensive relevance to problems of economic

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