#296 - More insight for less measurement? Why "early outcomes" are the sweet spot

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Objectives/aims
Early outcomes are metrics that are in the "sweet spot", by being more meaningful than output indicators, and more easily attributable than impact measures. Greater use of "early outcomes" has the potential to make testing and learning more credible, actionable, and responsible. Yet, neither the concept or the term is well known.

This presentation will share cases from the portfolio of the Right-Fit Evidence Unit, an advisory group based at Innovations for Poverty Action, a research and policy NGO working on global poverty. These cases will highlight the value of early outcomes in testing and learning activities in global development.

Relevant theme: 3. What works and how to do it: Evaluating implementation and impact

Methods
The cases that I intend to draw on during this presentation will include the following methods:

1. A comparative analysis of the predictive validity of early outcomes (classroom observations) compared with compromised quasi-experimental impact measures, using internal data from a livelihoods program targeting smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa
2. A comparative analysis similar to the above, but looking across multiple implementation sites of the Teaching At the Right Level evidence-based education intervention
3. A descriptive study of teacher quality spanning four early childhood education providers in Uganda, with a sample size of several hundred classrooms, using

the evidence-based TIPPS (Teacher Instructional Processes and Practices) tool, and how it was used to inform programmatic improvements.

Main findings

In the cases described, our consulting teams found that early outcomes provided a valuable proxy for impact that was less costly than compromised quasi-experimental methods, but no less credible, and far more actionable. For instance, working with an agriculture NGO in Sub-Saharan Africa on their impact measurement strategy, we found that a simple model based on early outcomes was able to predict impact per farmer to within 20% of the value estimated by a costly quasi-experimental impact evaluation.

In many cases, a key reason the implementers want to measure impact is to inform *action*; to know how to tweak and refine their work. Early outcomes data can shed light on why and how the intervention is working (or isn't), as well as key mediating variables or assumptions that the implementer can try to influence. In this way, they can often be more actionable than impact data alone.

A theoretical model is suggested for assessing when early outcomes are likely to be valid proxies for impact, informed both by strength of theory and strength of empirical evidence as to predictive validity. The findings calls for further research on which early outcomes have this characteristic of predictive validity, and methods for evaluating this.