

A conversation with Rachel Silverman, August 2, 2017

Participants

- Rachel Silverman – Senior Policy Analyst and Assistant Director of Global Health Policy, Center for Global Development
- Josh Rosenberg – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Ms. Silverman.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Rachel Silverman of the Center for Global Development (CGD) as part of its investigation into family planning programs.

Major takeaways

- GiveWell noted that, based on its preliminary analysis, it seems that there is little rigorous research on the impact of particular charities' family planning programs on contraceptive uptake. For example, there seem to be few randomized controlled trials or high-quality quasi-experimental studies (such as difference-in-difference studies) that assess whether programs have led to increased contraceptive use. Ms. Silverman generally agreed with this conclusion. Her understanding is that there are few, if any, charities that have conducted high-quality experimental or quasi-experimental impact evaluations of their programs. CGD published recommendations for improving evaluation of family planning programs in its report, "Aligning to 2020: How the FP2020 Core Partners Can Work Better, Together" (<https://www.cgdev.org/publication/aligning-2020>).
- Ms. Silverman believes that it is best to assess family planning programs based on whether they are helping women to choose the contraceptive method that is best for their needs, which may include not prescribing a contraceptive method at all depending on a woman's situation. Therefore, it is likely more appropriate to assess charities' family planning services holistically, rather than aiming to support and assess specific contraceptive methods that may be especially inexpensive per year of contraception provided, such as long-acting reversible contraceptives. If a program is too strongly incentivized to push certain methods, it may lead to negative outcomes such as a woman receiving an intrauterine device (IUD) that must be removed after only a month of use because it was not actually the best contraceptive method for her situation.
- Performance Monitoring and Accountability 2020 (PMA2020) conducts regular population-level surveys to assess family planning use and service quality; these may provide a useful model for assessing the service quality of charities' programs. PMA2020 also has data on contraceptive use that might allow a researcher to assess the effectiveness of family planning programs in particular regions. However, Ms. Silverman is not yet aware of any research

that has used PMA2020 data to assess charities' effects on contraceptive uptake.

- One metric that is commonly used to assess the impact of family planning programs is how many “additional users” of modern contraceptive methods a charity is reaching over time. However, this metric may be a poor proxy for a charity’s impact since there may have been a large number of additional users of modern contraceptives even in the absence of a charity’s activities. Since there are multiple possible providers of family planning services in most settings, including government and private for-profit actors, attributing impact to any one actor, such as a charity, is complex and likely requires rigorous research.
- Thanks in part to recent pledges made by governments and private donors (for more information, see <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/future-family-planning-podcast-rachel-silverman>), Ms. Silverman is hopeful that the total amount of global funding for family planning programs will at least remain steady for the next year. However, this depends crucially on the U.S. government maintaining a similar level of funding for family planning work. Early indications suggest that the U.S. government’s funding for this work will remain similar despite major proposed cuts under President Trump’s ideal budget. However, as of early August 2017, the U.S. government’s total contribution had not yet been finalized.
- Ms. Silverman’s impression is that there is limited rigorous evidence on the potential secondary effects of family planning, such as improvements in economic or health indicators, in low- and middle-income countries; however, there is a robust “power of the pill” literature from the United States showing the impact of contraception on women’s education and economic empowerment. To understand the existing literature, she recommended reviewing work by scholars including Grant Miller (Stanford University), Claudia Goldin (Harvard University), Martha Bailey (University of Michigan), Heinrich Hock (Mathematica Policy Research), Gustavo Angeles (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), and Nikhil Gupta (Princeton University).

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