A conversation with Neil Buddy Shah on March 30, 2014

Participants

- Neil Buddy Shah — Founding Partner, IDinsight
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Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Neil Buddy Shah.

Summary

As part of its work aiming to support the creation of future GiveWell top charities (for more, see this blog post: http://blog.givewell.org/2014/02/26/2014-plan-for-givewells-traditional-top-charities-work). GiveWell spoke with Dr. Shah about the process of setting up and evaluating a pilot program, his thoughts on specific programs, and the timeline and costs of implementing an evaluation.

The process

Building the evidence base for a program and identifying a possible organization to scale it up:

1. **Identifying the right implementing partner(s).** For the pilot program, it would be best to partner with organizations that are already working in a given region and that could eventually implement the intervention at scale. (*Note by GiveWell: this would mean a program that had room for more funding of approximately $2-5 million/year.)* It may be challenging to find existing groups other than governments with that capacity. Pilot programs could be implemented by several small NGOs, perhaps with a third party such as Evidence Action providing central management and oversight.
2. **Adapting the intervention to the local context while retaining its important features.** A focus of IDinsight's is helping implementers do this. Another consideration for the pilot program is that the study sample and operational model should be representative of the program at scale.
3. *Evaluating the program*. A focus of IDinsight's is conducting evaluations that focus on specific outcomes of interest. This kind of streamlined evaluation is ideal for informing the "path-to-scale" decisions of individual organizations and is likely less expensive than more general evaluations.

IDinsight's approach

IDinsight aims to undertake research that directly affects the decisions of funders and implementing organizations. This research evaluates the question of whether an intervention works in the specific context in which it will be implemented and often only

gathers data for the most relevant outcomes measures. IDinsight starts from a demand-driven perspective of what questions an implementing organization needs answered in order to make a programmatic or policy decision. IDinsight then conducts an impact evaluation that is as rigorous as possible given the operational and timeline constraints of the implementing organization.

Thoughts on particular programs

In choosing a program, a major consideration for IDinsight is whether it has experience in the program's geographic area. IDinsight is active in East Africa, Southern Africa, and India.

GiveWell asked IDinsight for its thoughts on the following programs:

- **Incentives for immunization in India** — IDinsight is familiar with the implementers and context; two of its four co-founders worked on the incentives for immunization study.
- **Incentives for temporary labor migration in Bangladesh —** This may be a good candidate, because working conditions in Bangladesh are similar to those in parts of East India, with which IDinsight is familiar.
- **Eyeglasses and academic performance in China** —IDinsight is not working in China, so it would have to determine whether this intervention could be generalized to contexts where it has experience.
- **Commitment savings in the Philippines** — IDinsight is not working in the Philippines. IDinsight is more likely to consider this intervention if it can be generalized to contexts where it has experience and ongoing operations.

Timeline and costs

IDinsight's capacity is currently constrained, but has new staff joining in the summer. Field operations could begin in mid-to-end summer of this year at the earliest. High-level planning, which includes identifying implementing partners and areas to replicate studies, could begin sooner.

Major factors that determine costs include:
- The geographic distribution of the intervention. Wider distribution requires more travel and increases the cost of surveying.
- Whether implementing partners keep good administrative data, which can help decrease surveying costs.
- The outcome variable of interest that will guide an implementing organization's decision – if there are proximate outcomes that are known to be tightly linked with an ultimate outcome of interest (e.g., sleeping under an insecticide treated bed net in a malaria endemic region), then the evaluation can rely on the proximate outcome variable, and therefore be faster and cheaper than powering a study with an ultimate outcome like malaria incidence or morbidity/mortality that takes longer to observe and is a less frequent event.

- Sample size – if the policy relevant effect size is very small, then this requires a larger sample, all else being equal. The larger the policy relevant effect size is, the smaller the sample size needs to be, which decreases costs.

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