

A conversation with Alix Zwane on February 18, 2014

Participants

- Alix Zwane, PhD – Executive Director, Evidence Action
- Elie Hassenfeld – Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director, GiveWell

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

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Alix Zwane about GiveWell's interest in providing support to Evidence Action and other groups to scale up evidence-backed programs.

Evidence Action's current work on scaling up evidence-backed programs

Scaling up evidence-backed programs is a topic that Evidence Action is currently discussing internally. There is a major gap when moving programs from the stage where an evaluation indicates they are effective to the stage where they can be implemented at significant scale. Scaling a program requires a significant amount of work: it requires specifying the program to be scaled up and identifying partners – organizations or governments – that can scale up the program. Working to demonstrate how to bridge this “gap” has been identified as the mission of Evidence Action; while protecting their core water and deworming programs, they are now talking about taking the first steps to add new programs.

Evidence Action currently has a long list of types of programs it might consider scaling up. Some examples of things under discussion include:

- Increasing uptake of health products by, e.g., using free lentils or other goods to incentivize vaccine uptake or by distributing free bed nets on deworming days.
- Providing information about the financial returns of various activities, including, for example, increased income from staying in school, benefits of seasonal migration, and advice on improved agricultural techniques.
- Peer/volunteer promoters of behavior change, including advice on improved agricultural techniques.
- The remedial education program created by Pratham.
- Programs that could improve microfinance's social impact.

Evidence Action is currently dealing with the tension between (a) specifying the program it is interested in scaling up (e.g., lentils for vaccines) and (b) finding an implementing partner who wants to scale a program. Being demand driven and seeking a long run institutional home from the outset is likely critical to success. Thus, Evidence Action anticipates that it may be open to scaling various programs depending on partner interest.

There are a range of other topics that are also under discussion as potentially important to learn about to protect both the commitment to evidence and the commitment to scale. For example, another issue Evidence Action is considering is the degree of early (i.e., first few years) evaluation (in addition to process monitoring) it will implement in order to determine whether the program appears to achieve similar benefits when operating at scale as it did when it was part of a trial. Some programs may have externalities that are not all positive (e.g., there may not be enough jobs for seasonal migrants) that could affect a program's impact at scale.

Evidence Action's needs/plans

Evidence Action hopes to hire a postdoc to assist with the next stage of research: evaluating the evidence for programs it might scale up and considering feasibility of scale up. It would then hire a more senior person (likely as a consultant) to engage with potential partners. The consultant and postdoc would work together. The consultant would have experience building partnerships while the postdoc would understand the research well and could assist the consultant in determining which parts of a program were necessary vs. negotiable.

Dr. Zwane previously managed someone in a similar postdoc research role while she was at the Gates Foundation.

Evidence Action believes that \$70,000-\$100,000 would allow it to move forward with hiring a postdoc and that full exploration of a programmatic area would cost about twice that amount. It currently has approximately \$250,000 in unrestricted, core funding which it prefers not to allocate to this because this would significantly diminish its reserves.

Two other donors (in addition to GiveWell) have expressed interest in supporting Evidence Action's work in this area of learning and new program development.

Others working in the area of scaling up proven programs

GiveWell mentioned having already spoken with Innovations for Poverty Action and IDinsight.

- 3ie. There is an ongoing search for a new ED
- The Development Impact Evaluation Initiative (DIME). A World Bank program run by Arianna Legovini that has a research, advocacy, and scale mission.
- Global Development Innovation Ventures (GDIV). USAID, the Department for International Development (DFID), and the Omidyar Network set up GDIV, an entity that aims to do similar work to Development Innovation Ventures (DIV) but be open to external funding.
- International Growth Centre (IGC). Funded by DFID and housed at the London School of Economics.
- There may be individuals within major international organizations (e.g., someone at CARE, Save the Children, Oxfam, etc.) who would be able to use support to work on

scaling up proven programs. This would involve the challenge of working with a large institution.

- East Meets West Foundation. This is a high-quality, data-driven organization that Evidence Action collaborates with and that has used outcome-based financing and RCTs to design strong programs.

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