Impact Evaluation in Africa: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Impact evaluation—the causal evaluation of government and private-sector policies—has increasingly taken on a central role in microeconomic work in development economics. The influence of this research on governments and other policymakers in Sub-Saharan Africa has, arguably, been limited to date. This is partly a question of time, as demand for rigorous policy evaluation has been building gradually in many parts of the world. It may also be a result of the geographic and research focus in the first wave of experimental studies. Much of the pioneering work to develop prospective, experimental methods was conducted in a limited number of locations and with NGOs rather than government partners. The number of large-scale, randomised, controlled trials of government policies in Africa remains limited, but it is growing. The leading examples to date have been undertaken in Latin America.¹

This special issue showcases the scope of impact evaluation methods in Sub-Saharan Africa today. Two features are evident from the collection of papers presented here. First, as illustrated by the diversity of topics covered in this volume, evaluation methods can be applied to a broad range of policy questions. Such questions range from microeconomic and localised policies, such as in health and education, to policies with potential for general equilibrium and market-wide effects, such as migration and entrepreneurship.

Second, while modern impact evaluation studies share a concern for the identification of causal policy parameters, they employ a broad range of

¹ Perhaps the best known of these is the PROGRESA/OPORTUNIDADES study undertaken by the Mexican Government, with support from IFPRI (Schultz, 2004).
empirical methods. Beyond their differences in application, the collection of papers in this issue demonstrates that, even with a focus on causal identification of policy impacts, a broad toolkit can be convincingly and flexibly employed. These include both experimental and quasi-experimental methods, as well as studies designed to yield internally valid results but also to shed light on the external validity of their findings. As this volume illustrates, methodological rigour does not imply that the methods of causal impact evaluation must drive the questions being asked.

The contributions to this issue by Kazianga, de Walque and Alderman and by Lucas and Mbiti both study policy impacts on outcomes in primary schools. But they look at different sets of policies and use different identification strategies. Lucas and Mbiti exploit differences across districts in pre-programme dropout rates to identify the effect of free primary education (FPE) on gender differences in completion rates. The authors find that FPE increased completion rates for all but did not close the gender gap. They argue that other interventions may be needed to keep adolescent girls in school until completion of their primary schooling. The paper highlights the scope for ‘big data’ in development economics: the analysis combines data from a range of sources, including the full set of primary leaving examinations from the years 2000 to 2007 and a sample from the Kenyan national census. As management information systems continue to improve in education and other sectors, and as such records become increasingly available to researchers in a usable format, the scope for evaluations of large-scale government policies by such quasi-experimental methods is likely to increase.

In contrast, Kazianga and co-authors use a randomised controlled trial approach to compare the effectiveness of alternative food-for-education programmes in Burkina Faso. This study embodies the prospective, experimental approach that has been increasingly favoured by development economists. But this is a randomised, controlled trial with a twist: the authors provide a side-by-side evaluation of two alternative policies intended to achieve the same ends, comparing these against the same outcome measures in representative samples of the same population. The authors also provide a theoretically motivated exploration of heterogeneity in programme responses that sheds light on the possible mechanisms behind unexpected results—such as the impact on attendance for school enrollees that appears to be negative.

In addition to Lucas and Mbiti, quasi-experimental approaches to impact evaluation are also illustrated in the papers by Muto and by Gilligan, Hoddinott, Kumar and Taffassee. Both Gilligan and co-authors
and Muto make use of original panel data to more convincingly identify programme effects. The former paper shows how this can be combined with matching methods, while the latter combines panel data with an instrumental variables approach to identify the effect of interest.

Gilligan, Hoddinott, Kumar and Taibasse apply matching methods in panel data to study the effect of large-scale social protection programmes. Whereas the early field-experimental literature focused on understanding the impacts of individual policy interventions in isolation, this paper demonstrates the potential for analysts—with careful use of observational methods for policy evaluation—to study the interaction between conceptually distinct types of policy. Using the dose–response model of Hirano and Imbens (2004) to jointly analyse the effects of public works transfers and technological assistance, they find evidence of substantial complementarities between these two policies.

The paper by Muto demonstrates that applications of impact evaluation methods need not be confined to public-sector programmes. Muto studies the effects of mobile phone ownership on migration decisions in Uganda. Her paper shows that well-timed survey data collection, combined with rapidly changing market conditions—driven here by the expansion of network coverage across Uganda—can be used to identify impacts of households’ market decisions, at least for a policy-relevant subset of the population who take up a new technology such as mobile phones in response to this changing landscape of market conditions.

While some degree of experimental control is inevitably sacrificed in the reliance on natural experiments to evaluate policies, this shortcoming is often counterbalanced by an advantage in terms of external validity. The observational studies described above can, to varying degrees, lay claim to the identification of policy impacts on the population of interest and under the implementation modality—be it government or private sector—to which researchers and policymakers are likely to seek to extrapolate such findings.

This issue of external validity is directly addressed in the paper of Berge, Bjorvatn and Tungodden in this issue. The authors evaluate business training provided to microfinance clients. This is an area of considerable policy importance, given not only the evidence that poor management practices explain differences in firm performance across countries (Bloom et al., 2010), but also the concern among microfinance organisations, operating in an increasingly competitive environment, to provide services valued by their clients. Berge and co-authors experimentally assign microfinance clients to receive the same business training programme from either a
professional trainer working closely with the researchers, or internally from the microfinance institution itself. The contrast in results is striking, with attendance, learning and satisfaction outcomes substantially worse when training is implemented internally by the microfinance organisation. The authors conclude that impact evaluation of an externally provided intervention may only provide an upper bound on what would be the impact if the intervention were scaled up by a local organisation.

Taken together, the papers in this special issue demonstrate that the methods of causal impact evaluation are alive and well. They can be applied to a range of important policies, allowing comparisons of alternative designs and tests for complementarities between policies. Results are of substantial interest to policymakers. As the demand for evidence-based policymaking continues to grow in Africa, it will be important for policymakers to work with researchers to enable such studies, whether through expanding access to administrative data, or through building in experimental components to the design of government programmes. Rigorous evaluation of policies is not possible only in specialised NGO settings. Collaboration between researchers and policymakers is needed to ensure that future research not only answers questions of interest to policymakers, but also generate findings that are scalable and generalisable to the populations that policies seek to assist.

References

