

Ruth Levine: Wow. What a day in Washington DC and in the beautiful RRB. Evidence, counterfactual, monitoring for decision making, ideas to fight poverty and ill health, bipartisan calls for accountability, and public policy related to development - all this and FY18 hasn't even begun. The organizers of this incredible event really are owed our deep gratitude for bringing so many people to talk about such interesting ideas.

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Now that I've been given the chance to say a few remarks toward the end of the day, I'm thinking it might be a good idea, a good time to make some definitive statements about whether randomized control trials are really the way to learn anything in international development. Just kidding. What I really think it might be a good idea to do is share some thoughts not about methods but about morals. So it's a little unusual for me to do something like this. I'm not a philosopher and I'm definitely not a clergy person. It's an unusual topic, I think, for many of us to discuss because we're more accustomed to talking about rationality than morality. But I think that no field, and certainly not the field of evidence informed policy making and testing new ideas, no field can really advance and be sustained without kind of finding and articulating its moral core. I'm gonna try to make a few maybe feeble attempts at doing that, upon which you can improve in the future.

If I were to ask any of you what draws you to using information and evidence for public policy making at all levels, I'd probably hear a range of answers. We want to make sure the tax dollars are used well. We want policy makers to know what the impact is of the decisions they make. Maybe some would say, well, you know, my graduate advisor was a randomista and so, well, so am I. I think if we talked through it a little bit more, we'd come together to a deeper set of responses to that question. Why do you do this work? Why should this work be done? You might not think about it every day with every regression you run or every randomization you do or every program you monitor, but the work of evidence informed policy making, which I am including in the testing of new ideas, is really about truth and justice and equality and creativity and the love of others.

These are deep topics and it's almost the cocktail hour, so I'm just gonna touch on a few of these and offer a few starting thoughts. First the value of truth. Across all culture and certainly our own, the value of truth is held high and the sin of lying is held low. One of the, you can see it from childhood. One of the main tasks that parents is to instill in their children a self love of telling the truth even when it's difficult to do that and a guilty conscience when they tell a falsehood even when that's the self-serving, especially when that's the self-serving, thing to do. That value sustains throughout our lives and the societies we want to build.

It's really the work of data scientists and evaluators, researchers, the people who engage in much of the work we've heard about today, that's fundamentally about revealing truth. Sometimes the truths are not earth shattering. A nutrition program was supposed to make a big difference in children's nutritional status and it made a small difference or maybe no difference. Millions of people, if you follow a certain policy, are gonna go without health care. These are intrinsically important because they're part of this larger aspiration that we be truthful in public affairs and that

[00:05:00] true, verifiable or reproducible information can shine a light that chases away the ignorance and falsehoods.

[00:05:30] The work is not only about truth. It's also about justice. The easiest connection to make between evidence and foreign policy making and justice is around distributed justice, the just allocation of resources within a society. Let me tell a little story to get into this. Many years ago I was on a panel with Dr. [Paul Farmer 00:05:37]. I thought the panel was gonna be about kinda global health policy. It turned out that it was a debate about whether cost-effectiveness analysis was a tool of neo-colonial oppression of the poor. I was tapped to be on the pro cost-effectiveness analysis side of that. Dr. Farmer took up the counter argument, saying that cost-effectiveness analysis was just kind of a convenient excuse to deny health care to the poor. I was extremely baffled then by the kind of juxtaposition of thinking about costs and effectiveness and thinking about justice.

[00:06:00] I now think that what happened in that debate is part of a larger failing in our community. We do not state affirmatively, consistently, persuasively that what we are doing is contributing to distributive justice. We don't claim this moral high ground. We don't stand on it. Because of that, there are many who would stand with us who choose not to. In fact, often we kind of see that space altogether because it's uncomfortable to talk about justice and rights. I think we need to claim that space as you're catching on.

[00:06:30] There are, I think, a couple of part of this to consider. One important part is the emergence of values. What constitutes just distribution? Societies have to make these choices all the time between newborns and old people, dedicating resources in one direction or another. Between dedicating resources to our well being today or to the well being of our descendants in two, three, seven generations. Those choices are not based on empiricism. Those are based on religious, cultural, historical and many, many other sources of values.

[00:07:30] In my quite unsatisfactory debate with Dr. Farmer, the social choice or value that he was promoting was that, no matter where a person lives or what health condition they have, they have, they should receive health care that maximizes how long and how well that they live. That is truly a noble aspiration that I think many of us would associate ourselves with. But values are not enough to effect distributive justice. That's where the evidence comes in. So, pursuing this example a little bit, if we want to reach the goal of good health for all, regardless of geography or wealth, we need a lot of information. We need not only to know which preventive and treatment measures work for what health conditions and where, we also need to know how each dollar spent on treating a particular ailment or a given patient population can be used to obtain the maximum benefit.

[00:08:00] In other words, we need cost-effectiveness analysis as well as a lot of the other work we've heard about today: estimating the net impact of a given intervention or testing innovative means of improving human or environmental health. Back again to the discussion with Dr. Farmer, talking with critics of cost-effectiveness analysis over time, I came to understand that the actual critique was not so much about

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[00:10:00] whether you should use analysis to figure out how to optimize resources. The objection was to the assertion on the part of at least some, well, some, health economists that an intervention was cost-ineffective if it was two or three times the GDP per capita in a given country. That's what the critique was. I happen to agree that that is a value laden statement no matter how it's dressed up. But admitting that that's a value laden statement and that values can be derived from many sources doesn't take away from the fact that a huge amount of information and analysis is actually needed to effect the kind of distributive justice that I think many of us would argue for and would want to be fighting for.

[00:11:00] The story has a very simple point. Empirical analysis isn't a substitute for the value judgments and social choices that inform a theory of justice in any society but empirical analysis is an essential complement to those value judgments. Beyond the values of truth and justice, there's more. Evidence in foreign policy making helps to realize the value of equality. The moral value of equality is express in our country in lots of ways. The U.S. Constitution and civil law, one person one vote, equal protection under the law, equal justice under the law, and, whether within a legal or regulatory framework or not, there's a kind of wide-spread aspiration in this country, even if it's not fully realized a lot of the time, that each person is recognized as having equal value to every other person. That's almost the motto of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Of course, the Human Rights' Conventions ratified by member states of the United Nations also reinforce that idea.

[00:12:00] What do we do to help make that real? The work within the field of evidence and foreign policy making has a very specific and particular role to play, I think, and that centers on data. If it weren't for the efforts to collect information about, from each and every person or at least from a representative sample of each and every type of person, who would we know about? We would know about people who have voice and access in the public square. That is not enough for the value of equality.

[00:12:30] We don't usually think about it this way, I believe, but the data collected through household surveys and other means are absolutely fundamental to ensuring that public policy makers hear from people who are otherwise excluded: poor, marginalized, and many others.

[00:13:00] It is through data that we have a way to understand at least a part of what they are experiencing whether it's displacement after conflict and natural disasters or lack of access to quality education or intimate partner violence. Data is not a replacement for creating more space for people to speak for themselves, but it is an essential piece of that. It is one that we can work on. There's actually huge, huge opportunity before us, I probably don't need to even remind you, it's quite present as we engage in today's data revolution to make sure that our work lives up to this potential. That means making sure that we're including out of school children as well as children who are in school when we're doing learning assessments. It means asking both married and unmarried women about their sexual experiences and their reproductive behavior. It means dedicating sufficient resources to count the homeless during the 2020 census. It means asking women questions not only about their child bearing but about their work, and men not only about their work but about their fatherhood.

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[00:14:30] Finally, I want to talk about the contributions that evidence and foreign policy making can make and service of the value of human progress. On any given day, human beings have choices to make about whether they stay in the same place and accept the status quo or they work for something better for themselves and for their society. We see over and over again from religion to just the way we go about our public and private affairs, that we are always seeking to do better and to make more of our lives and the societies around us.

[00:15:00] It's no stretch to say that this value, the value of human progress is amplified and served by the work, much of the work that we've heard about today. People in the evidence community, the innovation community, we have to answer questions like, as a society, where are we now? That's a question that you can make guesses about, you can make assumptions about, but it's a whole lot better if you actually measure. Guessing will lead us astray. We have to answer questions like how effective are we now at solving specific problems? Again, we can guess and we can make up stories, but we can also measure and that's a lot better.

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[00:16:00] Innovation based on reason and spiced with creativity gives us the seed from which improvements can be developed. We've seen examples of all this today and I think we're gonna see some prizes soon of the ones that have impressed folks the most. What you've heard here, and thank you for bearing with me as I've ventured into this unfamiliar territory, is what I hope will be a starting point for a rich conversation about the ways in which the community that is working on generating evidence, and getting it into decision making of all kinds is not separate or certainly not opposed to a moral public policy but essential to it. We have to lift this conversation above the internecine debates about methods or an insistence that we are hard headed and not soft hearted. We have to assert strongly, repeatedly that failing to use facts and evidence in decisions about matters of consequence is not only dumb but it is wrong, deeply, irretrievably wrong. In contrast, championing the use of information and analysis is responsible and right.

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[00:17:30] Professionals in this building and elsewhere who know what it is to measure, to monitor, to estimate, to weigh, we have the responsibility each and every day to serve the aspirations of the progress, equality, justice and truth. Thank you very much.