Improving the Findability and Usefulness of NGO-Generated Research

A Giving Evidence Project, June 2014

It seems quite possible that somebody has discovered a great way to, say, prevent re-offending or improve literacy, but that nobody else knows about it. So their genius innovation doesn’t spread, and people may miss out simply because the research which shows its effectiveness can’t be found and/or isn’t clear. Surely this is unacceptable.

We suspect this because we’ve seen weaknesses in the ‘system’ for research by charities. Their research (including) could and should show what works, what doesn’t, what works best, and hence should enable evidence-based decisions. But it often doesn’t, because it’s unfindable or unclear.

Giving Evidence is starting to explore improving the system for NGOs’ research in two ways: by making the research findable by publishing/indexing it in one place, and making it clear about the intervention(s) used, the research question, the research method(s) used, and the results. This findability and clarity could radically transform our knowledge about what works and hence outcomes. It would build a vital foundation which can enable all kinds of improvements. The proposal arises from our work in medicine, where the whole evidence system – which accounts for so many improvements – relies on findable and clear research.

You’re welcome to be involved. If you’d like to chime in, please get in touch: admin@giving-evidence.com

<table>
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<tr>
<th>In an optimal system:</th>
<th>Why is this important?</th>
<th>In much of the NGO sector:</th>
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| Research is all findable and searchable in an open repository | So that others can find out about and replicate successful interventions, and learn about and avoid harmful interventions | Much research isn’t published at all
| | | Some is published on organisations’ own websites, hence tough to find (‘grey literature’)
| | | There’s no standard format, so it is published in whatever format the organisation chooses, which prevents comparisons
| The intervention is clearly described | | Often not described: certainly not in enough detail that it could be copied
| The research question is clear | A) so we can see whether the question has already been answered
| | | B) to enable assessment of the reliability of method used for answering that question
| | | C) to avoid spurious results from interrogating data until something interesting emerges
| | | Often not stated at all
| The research method is clear, as is research detail (e.g., sample size and how the sample was chosen) | Enables assessment of the reliability of the answer | Often described unclearly or not at all
| The results are clearly stated | To see the answer (obviously) | Variable

The first item here makes the research findable: the latter four make it clear and useable.
The concept

The project is essentially a consultation on the following concept:

_for each piece of NGO-generated research to be posted online (in a searchable database or with meta-data which makes it findable by search). It should detail the intervention enough that others could replicate it, and detail the research enough to enable informed decisions about the intervention’s effectiveness._

For each piece of research, NGOs would post a ‘report’ detailing basic elements of:

1. **The intervention used.** Research by NGOs is often essentially compliance: unlike scientific studies, interventions aren’t described well enough that somebody else could replicate it. Much detail is needed: e.g. for education, one would need to know the class sizes, length and number of lessons, number of children sharing a book, classroom set-up, the teachers’ qualifications, whether lessons are before or after lunch, etc.

2. **The question which the research (or ‘M&E’) is designed to answer.** One benefit of this is that it forces the researchers to have a clear question, as opposed to just doing some M&E because somebody’s asked them to (which is unlikely to yield insights). Notice that ‘proving that our work is effective’ – which prompts much M&E – is not a permissible research question! This clarity can reveal duplication and redundancy (e.g., that question’s already been answered) and also whether the research method (below) is suitable for that question.

3. **The research method used.** For example, interviews, pre/post surveys, propensity-score matching, randomized evaluation, beneficiary feedback. Again, detail is needed, such as sample size, how the sample was chosen (if a provider chooses the beneficiaries to survey, the results may be too biased to be useful), duration. This clarity is imperative for assessing the reliability of the research – and hence whether one should heed its findings. (See appendix.) It enables people conducting systematic reviews to easily judge what is worth including. It has a side-benefit of forcing the researchers (and funders) to consciously choose and reflect on their research method.

4. **The results.** It’s important to get all results, not just those which flatter the organization being researched. Having researchers state their research question reduces the chance of seeing only these positive results.

Note that this clarity is absolutely standard in reports of clinical trials and most other scientific experiments.

The project

The purpose of this project is to see whether the concept is feasible, what it would cost, who might fund it, who might run it, what dangers it entails, and what else needs to be in place to make it work (e.g., incentives / enforcement, unique IDs for NGOs). It’s unlikely that a perfect solution will be possible (at least, not first off) so we are interested in steps which would improve on the current system.

We are taking as a case study NGOs in UK criminal justice. We are consulting widely, including with: operational charities, funders (since they would almost certainly be necessary for ‘enforcing’ compliance), data architects, open data people, people who run & are involved in publication systems elsewhere (e.g., medicine, academia), people who conduct systematic reviews, academics in sectors where NGOs operate (e.g., criminologists).

We expect to run some surveys and some workshops. We may do a little study to gauge the extent of non-publication currently, and understand the reasons for non-publication.
Benefits of a better system for NGO-generated research

Our vision is to ensure that NGO-generated research is findable and clear, because this will enable more evidence-based decisions by funders, practitioners and others. Its benefits include:

1. **Enabling good interventions to spread.** It will have this effect as a result of:

2. **Enabling funders and providers to distinguish between interventions which are good from those which superficially appear good.** The difference is the reliability of the research on which effectiveness claims are based. (With a sample of three, you can claim almost anything; whereas with an RCT of 500 people, it’s much harder to conceal a programme’s true effect. In a real example, observational studies indicated that hormone replacement therapy reduces risk of death from heart attack, whereas rigorous RCTs (much more reliable) showed that HRT increases this risk by fully a third. If the research method and details are clear, readers can assess their reliability and hence make informed decisions about replicating the interventions. Funders (and NGOs’ boards, communities and others) could look up a proposed intervention and see whether it’s known to work, to harm, or what questions about it remain.

3. **Enabling better insights.** Combining studies to see the common threads (through systematic reviews and meta-analysis) produces much more reliable insights and results than do single studies. This relies on studies being findable (i.e., published and accessible), which this work would increase.

4. **Enabling work to improve research quality, and hence avoid interventions which don’t work.** Again, only by seeing the quality of research can anybody know what needs improving and target that work.

5. **Avoiding duplication and waste in the research process.** There is no point researching a question to which the answer is already known, but the current dispersal of research makes it hard for researchers to see what is known. There is almost certainly much duplication, consuming money which could be spent on making new discoveries and/or delivery. (In medicine, perhaps 85% of research funding is wasted this way.) By requiring researchers to post the question that they’re addressing, it will be clear whether that question has already been answered, which clearly would enable the avoidance of such duplication.

6. **Enabling research to meet needs of communities, policy-makers and practitioners.** In medicine, it’s known that research often doesn’t fit with the interests of patients and their carers, and there are mechanisms for fixing this. It’s quite probable that work in criminal justice research doesn’t fit the interests of communities, policy-makers and practitioners, but we currently can’t see if / where there is a problem because we can’t see what research exists nor what it says. This work would resolve this, so that unwanted research can be avoided.

Note that the problems with NGO-generated research are not unique to work in criminal justice, but affect many (perhaps most) social issues. The model that we’re proposing to explore could potentially be widely applied – and we would be delighted if it were. Indeed, there is already interest in this concept in every sector where we’ve mentioned it.

We are grateful to the funders who are enabling this work.

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Giving Evidence: organisation and track record

Giving Evidence’s work has two parts: consulting to donors and campaigning. They are closely connected, in that client work often raises, refines or tests ideas on which we campaign.

**Consulting** to donors. We help foundations and major donors select their focus, find strong grantees, and integrate evidence into all their processes such as selecting grantees and tracking their own performance.

**Campaigning.** Here we work on the ‘system’ of giving, rather than working with donors individually. It includes our work on learning from evidence-based medicine, and improving information infrastructure. We speak and write publicly about the problems with evidence in the charity sector and about what donors can do; and we publish new evidence. For example, we:

- published the *first ever data* (rather than just opinion) in the long-running debate about whether charities should be judged on their admin costs. It was one of The Guardian’s most read pieces of the year.
- published analysis showing that the evidence from the *world’s first social impact bond* (‘pay for success’ mechanism) won’t be robust enough to show whether it’s worked or not.
- wrote in *The Economist* and *Financial Times* about how donors could avoid waste and improve performance by sharing more information about their work.
- speak at high-profile sector events such as the Skoll World Forum, Center for Effective Philanthropy conference, the Arab Foundations Forum, and many non-sector events for general audiences.

**Team:** Giving Evidence was founded by Caroline Fiennes, who has worked for over a decade on improving philanthropy, advising donors and charities. She was an award-winning charity CEO, and teaches at Cambridge, Oxford and Yale University about effective giving. Her book *It Ain’t What You Give* was well-received (‘the Freakonomics of the charity sector’), and she serves on boards of The Cochrane Collaboration, the Center for Global Development, the Center for Effective Philanthropy and Charity Navigator.

The team also includes:

- **Dr Leonora Buckland:** former Executive Director of the Venture Partnership Foundation, and strategy consultant. Leonora co-designed the London Business School social entrepreneurship course, and has consulted to the Skoll Foundation and worked in the Cabinet Office’s Social Exclusion Unit.
- **Sarah Galbraith:** expert in global health, with 10 years’ experience in the World Health Organisation.
Appendix: the importance of research method

The table below shows the estimate of the effect of a reading programme in India as measured by five different evaluation methods. They differ markedly: at least four of them must be wrong and might lead a provider or funder to misuse their funds:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Impact Estimate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Pre-post</td>
<td>26.42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Simple Difference</td>
<td>-5.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Difference-in-Difference</td>
<td>6.82*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Regression</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Randomized Experiment</td>
<td>5.87*</td>
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*: Statistically significant at the 5% level

The UK’s National Audit Office recently published an analysis of the quality of almost 6,000 government evaluations. It contains a salutary nugget. Buried on page 25 is the finding that the strongest claims about effectiveness are based on the weakest research. This (probably) isn’t because the researchers are wicked, but rather because you can infer almost anything from a survey of two people: most social interventions have quite small effects, and robust research won’t let you show anything bigger.

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i Goldacre, B. (2011) Studies of studies show that we get things wrong, The Guardian

ii Researchwaste.net, an initiative of Sir Iain Chalmers, www.researchwaste.net