

Show me the evidence!

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One of the main ideas in Sebastián Piñera’s 2009 Chilean presidential campaign was the extension of maternity leave from 3 to 6 months. Advocates for the increase argued that it was unethical to leave children without their mothers’ care at three months. Those against this extension warned us about the negative effects that the policy would have on the female labor market. During the debate both sides ended up taking increasingly strident positions making it very difficult to come to any resolution.

More recently an old and unsolved debate has resurfaced in the politics arena. This has to do with segregation in Chilean education and how that relates to the current “cost-sharing” policy in subsidized schools. There has been a strong campaign pushing for the elimination of “cost-sharing” in order to allow poor families to send their kids to these schools. There has also been a lot of resistance. As in the case of the maternity leave debate, the discussion has been, long, polarized and mostly fought on ethical grounds.

Why is it so difficult to agree on the right policy? We want to argue that a big part of what makes endless debates possible is the lack of reliable evidence on many of these questions. In the absence of evidence about the efficacy of alternative policies it is natural for the debate to focus on broad ethical principles and while such ethical concerns are unquestionably important, in the absence of evidence these lead to a focus on the logical possibility of a violation of the particular principle than the actual fact of substantial harm to a specific group.

If, instead, we had known something about the effectiveness of each proposed policy, advocates and detractors of the policy proposal would have had to deal with the existence (and magnitudes) of evidence and consequently would have been driven to focus on the potential trade-off associated with the policy.

The problem is that this kind of reliable evidence on the effectiveness of social policies is very scarce. One main reason is that the production of evidence takes time. People in government usually have much shorter horizons than the time it takes to answer some of the most important policy questions and few governments want to do the homework for the next administration.

A second important barrier has to do with the way policy makers think about the purpose of an evaluation. After several meetings with different policy makers around the world we realized that in public administration the word evaluation tends to be associated with control and accountability. How much did you really spend on this program? How many people did you reach? Where did the rest of the money go? These are the type of questions that finance ministries usually

love to ask and line ministries rarely enjoy dealing with. As a result ministries often react negatively to any proposal to evaluate their programs.

While accountability is extremely important per se, this confusion of terms is unfortunate: Monitoring a program is fundamentally different from learning from the experience of a program. A program may be extremely efficiently implemented (and therefore show success based on monitoring) but have no impact (and therefore show no success in the *impact evaluation*).

In sum the monitor's primary interest is in ensuring compliance. The learning agenda, on the other hand, is mostly neutral to individual successes and failures, because they all contribute to the task of ultimately getting to a program that works well. Therefore as long as the ministry is willing to engage with the results, there is no inherent conflict between the learning agenda and the implementer's objectives.

How to get started on this agenda of promoting the production of evidence? A good way to overcome these issues could be the creation of an autonomous public institution for evaluating and support the design of social programs, which is explicitly forbidden to play monitoring role. Like the Central Bank and for similar reasons, this institution would be insulated from political interference and would produce evidence for the long run (rather the present government). Being legally empowered to carry out impact evaluations should make it easier for it to persuade government departments to build evaluations into their program rollout.

Finally, how do we ensure that such an institution would get set up? The initial impetus has to come institutionally from civil society and ultimately from the people: We must all claim the right to ask our representatives to explain why certain programs are being started or stopped. Is it evidence that they are going on, or just their faith? If it is evidence, how strong is that evidence, and what makes them believe in it? Asking such questions would both make us more conscious of how little most decisions are based on and give the politicians a reason to want an institution that help them answer them.