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Séminaire recherche. What does evidence do?

Development, policy impact, and the uncertain power of evidence

What does evidence do? Development, policy impact, and the uncertain power of evidence

RÉSUMÉ

This article analyzes how development experts seek to demonstrate the policy impact of their work to numerous publics, such as government bodies and international donors. It focuses on evidence-based development: the movement to reduce global poverty by producing quantitative evidence about "what works". Drawing on fieldwork with transnational NGOs in Kenya, India, and the USA, this article examines the contrast between my interlocutors' commitment to "rigorous" evidence as a prerequisite to successful poverty alleviation and yet the difficulties they face when assessing the actual impact of that evidence on development policy worldwide. By asking, along with my interlocutors, "what does evidence manage to do?", I evince the various forces which struggle alongside their ambition to shape policymaking. By engaging with literature on accountability and global health, I offer the concept of "uncertain power of evidence" to emphasize that, while quantitative indicators are ubiquitous in social life, their effects are multiple, unknowable, and unexpected.



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