

The vital need for a solid evidence base



By Sara Seims

The mission of the Hewlett Foundation is to improve the wellbeing of humankind through grant making to worthy organizations who share our specific interests. We rely upon well-conducted social science research to help us formulate robust theories of social change from which practical and concrete policies and programs can be developed, tested, evaluated and scaled up.

The Population Program of the Hewlett Foundation provides grants in two major areas: Improving reproductive health and rights in the areas of contraception, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (including HIV/AIDS) and safe abortion; and strengthening population science, eg improving the accessibility and use of demographic data and understanding links between economic development and population changes. Both of these areas are controversial, making it especially important to develop robust objective evidence – provided by researchers in the social sciences.

Results of this research have become an essential component of our grant making decisions. For example, there are ongoing field trials throughout the world that test

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and measure the impact of different interventions aimed at improving women's reproductive health and enhancing the status of women and girls. One study began in the 1970s in the rural and conservative Matlab region of Bangladesh. It showed that by training a small but significant cadre of women as outreach health workers and equipping them to go door-to-door to educate their peers, unplanned pregnancies were reduced, maternal and child health improved and the outreach workers themselves provided positive role models for young girls.

The declines in fertility and improvements in women's health have also been shown to have a significant independent effect on poverty reduction. Over time, the good results spilled over into other regions,

leading to a decline in fertility from six children per woman in the early 70s to a national average of three children per woman today.

Thanks to social science surveys we know that in high HIV/AIDS areas in developing countries, individuals may know how the virus is transmitted and be aware of condoms but still engage in unprotected sex. Social science has helped us understand that poverty, the status of women and girls, concepts of masculinity and so forth are all contributing to this 'disconnect' between knowledge and behaviour, but this research doesn't answer the question why. Social scientists have responded with improved study designs that directly address causality, such as randomized controlled trials and natural experiments.

While social science research has been an essential guide for our grant making, much more work is needed to develop methods that can answer causal questions. Without this, the full potential of social science to help improve the human condition will not be met ■

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