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Dear Holden, Elie and staff of GiveWell.

I hope to engage you in a serious discussion about this business of rating NGOs.

First: I am a co-founder, executive and technical director of a 25 years old NGO called Agua Para La Vida ([www.aplv.org](http://www.aplv.org)) which has a branch in the US, one in France and a newly officially recognized status as APLV-Nicaragua. It has helped directly remote Nicaraguan villages secure drinking water.

Second: I do believe that it is imperative for NGOs such as ours to evaluate their own work against the goals and norms that they have chosen and to make clear to their fund providers what these goals and norms are.

Third: by reading some of your own mulling of your problems and occasional mistakes I realize that you are open to an examination of your own performance by yourselves (in this respect I see a resemblance with us), and perhaps, in view of the fact that you are dealing with other people’s organizations you might be willing to entertain their point of view also.

So I would like to center the discussion on the difficulties of external ratings, especially if the staff is rating organizations with very widely different goals and areas of intervention, and also to consider the cost for the rated NGO, associated with seeking favorable ratings.

I will naturally deal with aspects I am most familiar with, though I think they have a broad validity.

As a starter I am attaching a form that we have recently formulated and which has to be completed by one of our own technicians who is going to survey full time the state of the 80 gravity flow systems we have built over these 25 years – an undertaking that will certainly take more than a year. I believe there is no answer to that questionnaire that is in any sense superfluous. Two questions arise.

* Are we able to afford the cost of such an inquiry? (The same technician could instead in the same time design and supervise the construction of several gravity flow systems). Our answer is yes. But an organization that is starting with a minimum number of technicians and marginal resources might choose differently. Yet it might well be worthy of external support.
* Could or would an external agency such as yours competently do the same work? I doubt it; (see the number of questions that we find relevant to the state of a water system- would you really have thought of all of them ? and would you be able to change these criteria advisably for the half dozen or so different manners of providing potable water in different rural areas?)

In general , aside from the knowledge required for it to be relevant, the difficulties of external evaluation no matter how impartial, is that such an exercise is neither simple nor unambiguous , and that to be trustworthy it entails serious costs, points I’d like to illustrate with several examples.

1. There is a paucity of data revealing directly and unambiguously the improvement in mortality and morbidity due to bringing of potable water to communities that lacked it. Why?

This is an aspect of the evaluation that we considered very early. We attempted to measure precisely that for infants and young children. Our first approach was to prepare a questionnaire directed at the mothers and to be circulated by our two social workers. We even hired consultants to help our personnel with the process. The consultants were loath to come on site and the social workers did not have the qualifications required for sufficiently critical interviews so that the results were so inconsistent that they had little value. We then consulted seasoned public health authorities who directed us to much simpler evidence:

We were to organize the regular (say monthly) weighing of the infants and the recording of their weight on a chart. It was recommended that the mother do the weighing themselves and keep the records at home. We then evolved means of doing so that did not require the mothers to be able to read and we produced a scale that could be mostly fabricated by the village residents and which permitted this hands-on operation. However for a meaningful evaluation we needed to carry out the same measurements on a comparison population (one that did not benefit from either potable water or hygiene education). So, while this is doable it involves a good deal of additional time, personnel and expense. Further difficulties occurred when the weighing program was affected by supplemental food programs organized by government initiatives: When these were interrupted (as they invariably were) the mothers refused to weigh their babies. Finally of course meaningful statistics would take years .

I still think the baby weighing program is worth doing but it is clear that it entails significant costs and involves us in activities that are not primary parts of our goals.

1. It seems a priori eminently reasonable for either a funding or rating agency to make sure that the wáter available to the villagers before intervention is in fact unsafely polluted .

But the resources that are required to demonstrate that (in view of the facts that villagers got their wáter from multiple sources, that they had to vary their sources with the season and that the degree of pollution of a given source varies enormously with the season ) are considerable and would limit the scope of the intervention of a small NGO considerably. Yet that small NGO may know that ALL wáter within its región of intervention is unacceptably polluted before intervention. Yet would a rating organization of a fund provider know that. ?

1. One general goal- many possible policies.

Why may an evaluation be necessarily ambiguous or inconclusive ? Simply because the aims of a program such as ours are not uniquely defined.

Examples:

1. Should we provide a smaller daily volume of good water for a smaller cost or a larger amount of water for a higher price per inhabitants ? Available money is limited. But Public Health specialists insist that the quantity of water per person is as important as (some say more important than) its quality.
2. Should we take care of the villages that are the most costly / inhabitant because nobody else is going to tackle their cases ( too remote, too difficult, too dispersed , etc..) or of villages for which the conditions lead to lower cost /inhabitants?

This has been a very real problem for us. We had until recently chosen the first option , ( with increasing funding difficulty) until we realized that that policy is no longer tenable in a period of funding crisis. But are’nt these villages the ones that are going to be deprived for the most distant future?

I realize that a rating organization might be enlightened enough not to take a stand on matters which are policy choices but then how can it recommend some NGOs rather than others? Either it will be handing the public rather indeterminate reports , or it will play safe and be able to recommand very few of these NGOs , even though they are far from the only ones worthy of support.

This is not to say that nothing useful can be reported by an external agency such as yours . Making available verified facts about its goals. Its finances , its results and its self questioning are of course valuable but :

1. Rating and recommending are, to me, much more questionable than informing.
2. I would propose to you that self evaluation by organizations dealing with crucial parts of development cannot be replaced by external evaluation.
3. Rating of individual projects by peer organizations , (cf: Peer Water Exchange) has the advantage of frequently informing usefully but still involves a good measure of arbitrariness.

Gilles Corcos,

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www.aplv.org