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Putting the pieces together

Public policies and programs have ambitious aims: to improve the quality of life for some segment of society. Equally as ambitious, perhaps, are the research efforts involved in assessing whether a program is achieving its intended objectives. There are multitudes of methods to make such assessments, from scientifically controlled trials to purely subjective analysis. Complicating assessment further, numerous external factors—economic, social, even natural disasters—may influence, or counteract, the effects of a given program. Program evaluation can help us see how these pieces of the puzzle fit together.

Key to evaluating program effectiveness is to focus on its intended outcomes. What, for example, is the direct effect of a program on its participants? What is its benefit to society at large? Whether evaluating a research program, such as ours at ERS, or a multi-billion dollar assistance program, a few key questions can start to discern the program's effects: Did the program affect the knowledge, skills, behavior, or well-being of the people who participated in it? By extension, did the program have a positive effect on a social priority? Did it do so in an efficient, well-managed manner?

Economic research and analysis can contribute an important piece of the puzzle. Recent ERS research on traceability, for example, helps inform efforts to better understand and evaluate private and public traceability systems. The research reveals the elements of efficient traceability systems for product differentiation, food safety, and efficient supply management. This information can help policymakers evaluate proposals for publicly mandated traceability systems.

Such analyses are not merely of academic interest. In an era of increasing pressure for fiscal restraint and competing national priorities, publicly funded programs face the requirement, indeed the necessity, of demonstrating that they function effectively and provide benefits to society. More than 10 years ago, the Government Performance and Results Act codified into law such a requirement. Presidential initiatives offered by successive administrations have also demanded improved program performance and accountability to taxpayers. Insights discovered through economic research, therefore, can help inform evaluations for these and many other efforts that seek to fit together pieces of a puzzle to understand the interaction of policies and the food and agriculture system.



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