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If time permits there may be opportunity for further questions at the end of the presentation.

There will be polls included in this presentation, you will have 1 minute per question to respond.

The speaker column can be minimized using the options in the top left corner of the tab.

This webinar will be recorded, and the recording will be added on UNU-WIDER YouTube channel.

WIDER Webinar | François Roubaud & Isabelle Guérin | IRD
Discussants Gulzar Natarajan & Rachel M. Gisselquist
Chair: Kunal Sen

COVID-19 and the role of RCTs in development

10 November 2020

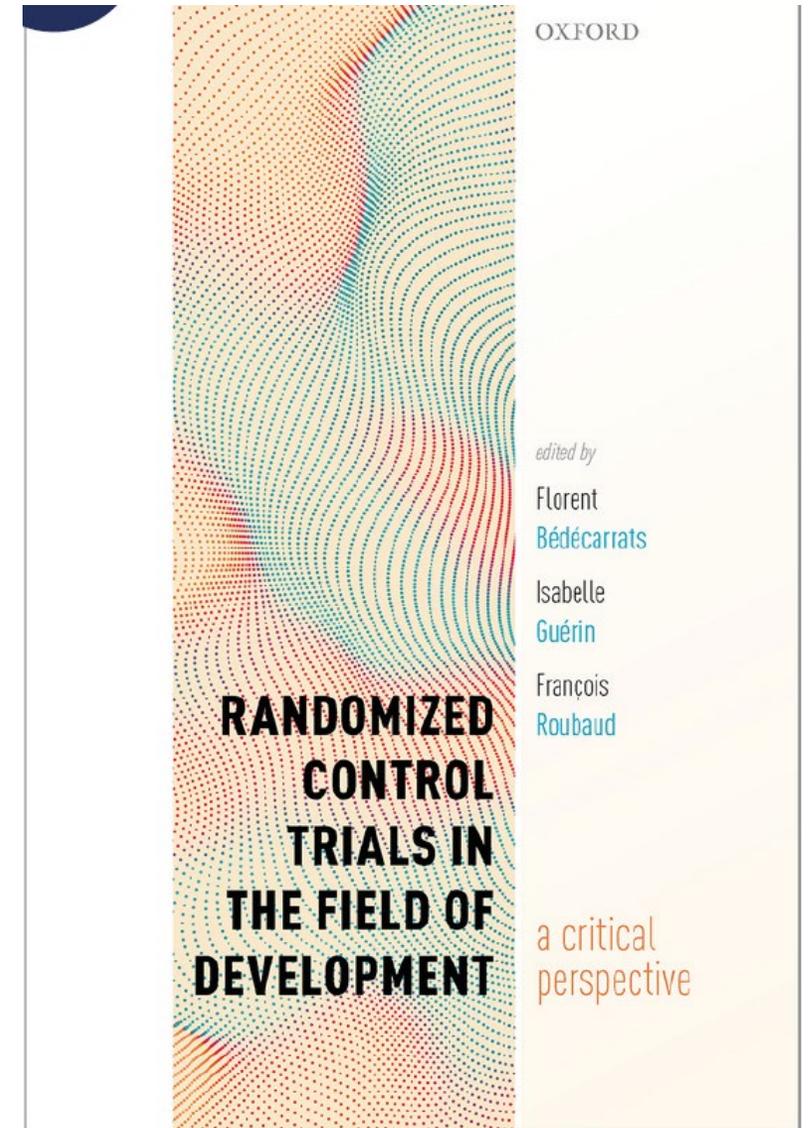


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Outline

I- The making of the book

II- Our takeaways



Does COVID-19 make a difference?

Poll: background questions

• **1. Do you think that RCTs are generally the best tool to measure the impact of development interventions?**

- - Yes, evaluators should always prefer RCTs when feasible
- - RCTs can be a relevant evaluation tool, but not always, depending on the question and the context
- - RCTs are generally to be avoided

• **2- According to yo, how much of “*what works and what doesnot*” in development can be evaluated by RCTs?**

- - Not much (less than 10%)
- - Some (20-50%)
- - Quite a lot (50 -90%)
- - All interventions can be measured by RCTs (~100%)

• **3- With the massive increase in poverty due to COVID in the world, do you think RCTs can make the difference in curbing the impact ?**

- - Yes
- - No

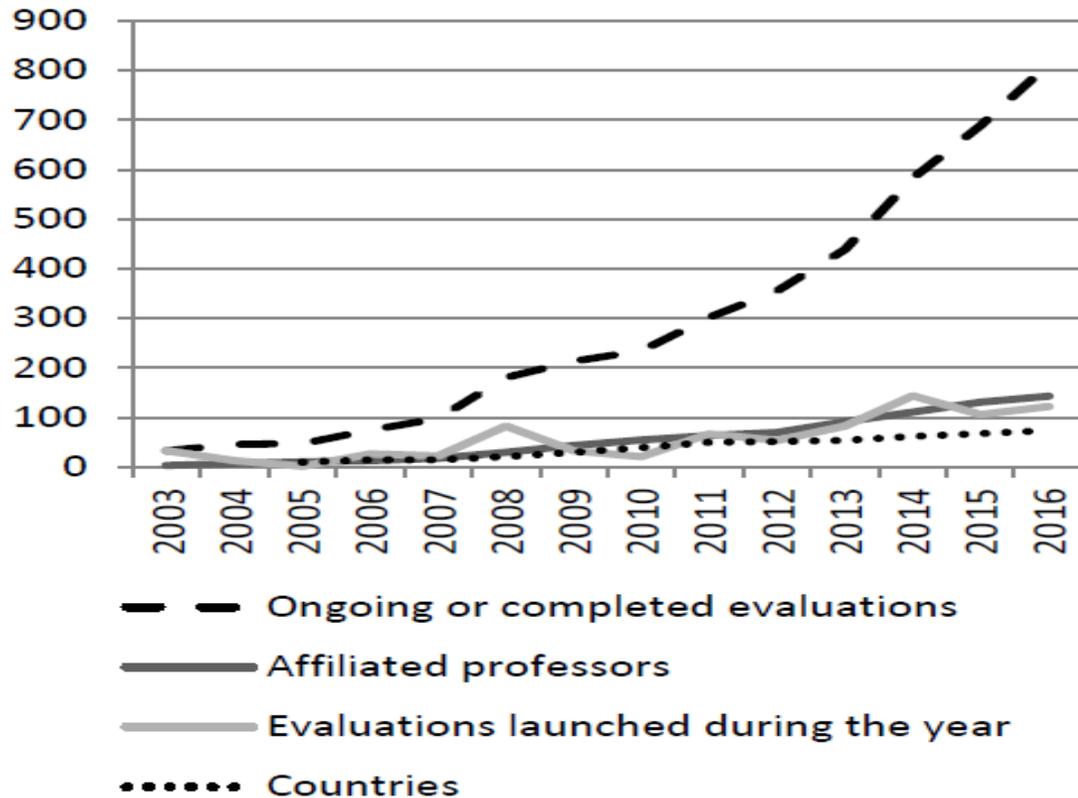
Motivations

a long run research programme: 2012-2020

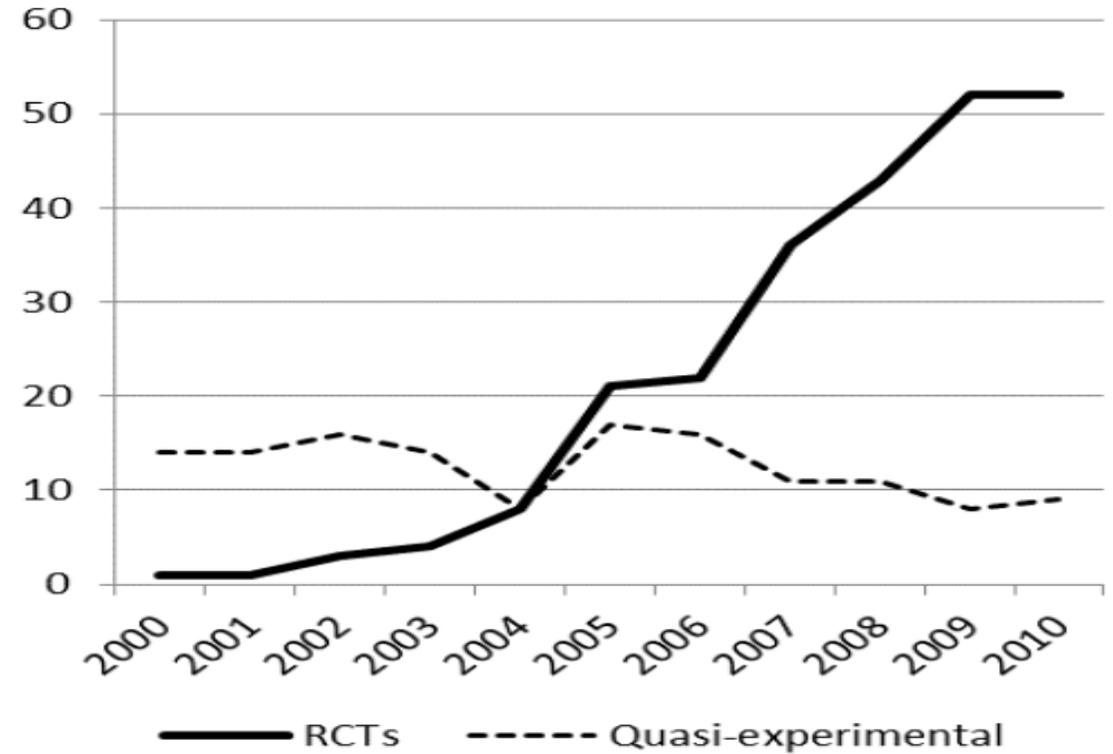
RCTs: exponential rise of the '*Gold Standard*' in impact evaluation

Figure 1: Growth in J-PAL and World Bank impact evaluations

J-PAL (2003-2016)



World Bank (2000-2010)



Intriguing: Revolution or Fashion?

Phase 1 (2012-2017)

2012: Launch of a research projet

❖ Research questions

- What: Methodological properties of RCTs (the Holy Grail)?
- Why: Road to global success (The Stairway to Heaven) ?

❖ The (Core) Team

- ✓ Florent Bédécarrats: political scientist , evaluator, geek; donor side
- ✓ Isabelle Guérin: socioeconomist, qualitative approach; academia
- ✓ François Roubaud: economist, statistician, quantitative approach; academia

❖ Results

A 1st series of papers: assessment of RCTs in development and ‘randomistas’ movement

Bédécarrats F., Guérin I, Roubaud F. (2019), “**All That Glitters Is Not Gold. The Political Economy of Randomised Evaluations in Development**”, *Development and Change* 50(3): 735-762.

[\[https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12378\]](https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12378)

Phase 1 (2012-2017)

- **Theoretical critics** (RCTs in theory; internal and external validity)
in line with others (Heckman, 1991; Rodrik, 2008; Ravallion, 2009; Barrett & Carter, 2010; Deaton, 2010; Harrison, 2011; Deaton & Cartwright, 2018)

Doing the maths

- **Empirical critics** (RCTs in practice; how experiments are conducted in the field)

Doing the cooking

- **Political economy of a 'scientific business'** (pro-RCT movement, 'Randomistas')

Doing the accounts (financial and symbolic)

Phase 1 (2012-2017)

3 sets of conclusion

- ❖ **RCTs are a sound tool to assess the causal impact, but:**
 - Limited to (yes/no) and (how much); no why (channels)
 - Conducted by the book and under certain conditions: rarely met in the *real world*
- ❖ **Three Randomistas' claims are illegitimate:**
 - RCT is the only rigorous method in town
 - RCTs can explain all '*what works and what does not*' in development
 - Multiplying RCTs on all topics and tropics to overcome external validity challenges (The '*hegemonical project*')
- ❖ **A Market domination strategy: monopoly and rents capture**
 - A successful business model (academia, donors, public audience – North)
 - Randomistas' *hubris*

Phase 2 (follow up: 2018-2020)

Two parallel tracks:

❖ **A thorough investigation of RCTs on microcredit**

- ✓ one vocal RCT on microcredit in Morocco
- ✓ The ‘last word’ on microcredit (AEJ:AE, 2015 *Special Issue*)

➤ **A (full) replication (Garbage In, Garbage Out?)**

Bédécarrats F., Guérin I, Morvant-Roux S., Roubaud F. (2019), “**Estimating microcredit impact with low take-up, high contamination and inconsistent data?**”, *International Journal for Re-Views in Empirical Economics*, Vol 3

➤ **Behind the scene: The conduct in the field (Explaining the mess)**

Bédécarrats F., Guérin I, Morvant-Roux S., Roubaud F. (2018), “**Never trust a RCT you haven’t doctored yourself: the case of *Al Amana* MFI in rural Morocco**”, DIAL Working paper (submitted, under review...).

➤ **Extending the scope (The conclusions still hold)**

Bédécarrats F., Guérin I, Roubaud F. (2020), “**Microfinance RCTs in Development: Miracle or Mirage?**”, In *RCT in Development...*, Chapter 7.

❖ **A collective book: *Randomized Control Trials in Development: a Critical Perspective* (Oxford University Press)**

Book Outline (12 Chapters and more)

- **Preface. Randomization in the tropics revisited: a theme and eleven variations** (Angus Deaton)
- 1. **Should the Randomistas (Continue to) Rule?** (Martin Ravallion)
- 2. **Randomizing Development: Method or Madness** (Lant Pritchett)
- 3. **The Disruptive Power of RCTs** (Jonathan Morduch)
- 4. **RCTs in Development Economics: Their Critics and Their Evolution** (Timothy Ogden)
- 5. **Reducing the Knowledge Gap in Global Health Delivery: Contributions and Limitations of RCTs** (Andres Garchitorena, Meg Murray, Beth Hedt-Gauthier, P. Farmer, Mat Bonds)
- 6. **Trials and Tribulations: The Rise and Fall of the RCTs in the WASH Sector** (Oliver Cumming, Radu Ban and Dean Spears)
- 7. **Microfinance RCTs in Development: Miracle or Mirage?** (Florent Bédécarrats, Isabelle Guérin and François Roubaud)
- 8. **The Rhetorical Superiority of Poor Economics** (Agnès Labrousse)
- 9. **Are The 'Randomistas' Evaluators?** (Robert Picciotto)
- 10. **Ethics of RCTs: Should Economists Care about Equipoise?** (Michel Abramowicz and Ariane Szafarz)
- 11. **Using Priors in Experimental Design: How Much Are We Leaving on the Table?** (Eva Vivaldi)
- 12. **Epilogue. Randomization and Social Policy Evaluation Revisited** (James Heckman)
- **Postface Interviews** (policy makers): Jean-Paul Moatti & Rémi Rioux (France)
Gulzar Natarajan & Ila Patnaik (India)

Overview

Sectors

Political economy

Proposals

Why this book? (1)

- Define the scope of application of RCT – what are the questions they can answer, what are the questions they cannot answer
- A dialogue
 - between disciplines
 - economics, econometrics, mathematics, statistics, political economy, socioeconomics, anthropology, philosophy, global health, epidemiology and medicine
 - between scholars and policy-makers
 - between **different visions regarding the scope of RCTs**

Why this book? (2)

- Ultimately, what opposes the advocates of RCTs and its opponents?
- The terms of the debate
 - Epistemology
 - Politics
 - Ethics

Epistemology – positivism versus pragmatism

- Universal answers versus reasonable explanations
- **Data protocol : theory versus feasibility** (Deaton, Heckman, Ravallion, Picciotto, Bédécarrats et al, Garchitorea et al., Spears et al.)
 - Sampling
 - Multiple biases between treatment and control groups
 - Insufficient take-up
 - Intervention artificially transformed
 - Data collection
 - Interpretation of the results – **the rhetoric superiority of RCTs** (Labrousse)

→ **critical implications for the type of intervention RCTs can study and the type of questions they can answer**

Politics and the meaning of development (1)

Private goods and microinterventions versus transformative politics

Poverty Pritchett, Picciotto Ravallion, Deaton Bédécarrats et al	kinky indicators (Pritchett) microcredit, savings, entrepreneurship training and financial education services	national, regional or sectoral wealth creation processes, existence of basic services
Health Garchitorena et al.	water filters, mosquito nets, training and bonus systems for health professionals, free consultations, medical advice by text message, and micro-insurance	management of complex and systemic health systems, involving skilled, motivated manpower, an infrastructure, the provision of medicines
Sanitation Pears et al	distribution, construction and use of latrines	management of human waste flows (which type of sanitation or cleaning network, which type of infrastructure and which type of regulation)
Governance of public administrations and institutions Natarajan	random inspections, financial incentives, independent third-party audits, call- centres and telephone feedback	weak state capacity, centralized bureaucracies marked by low trust, scarce resources, over-burdened bureaucrats, and challenging work environments

Politics - The meaning of development (2)

- In many cases, RCT are unable to prove impact
 - But they are able to compare **various modalities of a given intervention in terms of take up – testing behaviors** (Morduch – see also Pears et al.)
 - prices, timeframes, information, assistance, training, etc.
- challenging misconceptions in development economics (Morduch)
- RCT as a **social marketing tool?**
- fine if you consider development as an aggregation of microinterventions (but the impact issue remains unanswered)
 - problematic if you consider development as transformative politics

Ethics

- **Ethical standards do exist** (Declaration of Helsinki 1967 ; Belmont Report 1974 ; International Ethical Guidelines of Council for International Organizations and Medical Sciences (2002). National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979)
 - informed consent, do no harm principle, provision of specifically considered protection for vulnerable populations, risk analysis and responsive monitoring, etc.
- **Why randomistas are largely unaware of these principles?** (Abramowicz and Szafarz; see also Deaton, Ravallion, Picciotto, Ogden)
 - **advancing science versus protecting experiments' subjects**

As a way of conclusion – RCTs and Covid

- Nudges
 - to increase insurance take-up, to improve online schooling site, to improve social distancing behavior
- Advice that governments should make major investments in two areas: cash transfers and mobile-money infrastructure
- This is not useless, but
 - What's innovative?
 - Evidence is sometimes doubtful (cf. supra)
 - **Crucial questions are missing**