The reach of relevance in RCTs: balancing context and validity in education experiments in developing countries

This panel will explore the question of when and what types of evaluation results apply in which countries, sectors and situations. While education experiments in developing countries have proliferated in the last 10 years, the evidence base to inform what works to address a specific challenge, in a particular context, may still be sparse. If evidence is to shape policy, how should this the evidence generated by the still limited pool of experimental studies be applied, and what other types of evidence are sufficiently relevant and rigorous to inform development decisionmaking? How can donors prioritize their investments in building the evidence base, and what role should replication play? This panel brings together leading researchers who have either conducted or supported a wide range of education research with varying levels of internal and external validity. Patrick McEwan from Wellesley College will discuss his recent meta-analysis paper about learning in developing countries, and how these results can inform policy. Lant Pritchett and Justin Sandefur from the Center for Global Development will discuss their paper which discusses the importance of context, and emphasizes that simply combining effect sizes across studies may not be relevant to the policymaker or donor. Barbara Bruns from the World Bank will present the results of her recent paper on teacher bonus pay in Brazil (co-authored with Claudio Ferraz), which is similar to several studies conducted elsewhere, and she will highlight the importance of replicated studies in different country contexts (and with different program designs) as a guide to improving program design. Christine Beggs from USAID will chair the session and discuss USAID's work and their efforts to balance validity and context when identifying research priorities.