

Randomised Trials in Development

Economics

What field experiments established, and what they cannot settle.

Strengths

- Credible causal identification
- Tests what actually happened, not intent
- Surfaces effects contrary to expectation
- Comparable cost-effectiveness estimates
- Can be replicated across contexts

Limits

- External validity to other settings
- Cannot test large structural changes
- General equilibrium effects invisible at small scale
- Ethical limits on what may be randomised
- Publication favours positive findings

THE DIFFERENCE THAT MATTERS

A trial answers a narrow question well. Scaling requires an argument about mechanism, not only about the result.

The scale-up problem is real: interventions that work in a trial often weaken substantially when delivered by a state system.