



# Nimble RCTs

A Powerful Methodology in the Program Design Toolbox

[www.poverty-action.org](http://www.poverty-action.org)

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**PRACTITIONERS FORUM**  
ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING AND  
MONITORING, EVALUATION & LEARNING

JUNE 5-6, 2018  
The Makati Shangri-La Hotel | Philippines

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COALITIONS FOR CHANGE



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# Challenge

A = Designing the right program or policy

B = Implementing the chosen program or policy well

Success = A x B



# What goes into "B"?

Suppose a program is selling something  
(immunizations, savings accounts, rainfall insurance, mobile money, etc.)

Good marketing (text, testimonial, channel, color, etc)

Right pricing

Offer timed on the right day

Offer timed at the right time

Offer sold to the right person in the household



# Nimble RCTs...

- AKA rapid fire or A/B tests
- Short-term outcomes
- Often operational questions like take-up (buying, accepting, messaging, clicking, viewing)
- Typically use administrative data
- Key distinguishing features:
  - Faster than traditional RCTs
  - Cheap (if no surveys involved), maybe even negative cost
  - Operational focus (typically)



# What Can You Measure with a Nimble RCT?

- Short-term outcomes for which good administrative data is available, such as:
  - Product take-up
  - Program enrollment
  - Attendance
  - Adherence

i.e., outcomes that are earlier or “higher-up” in the theory of change

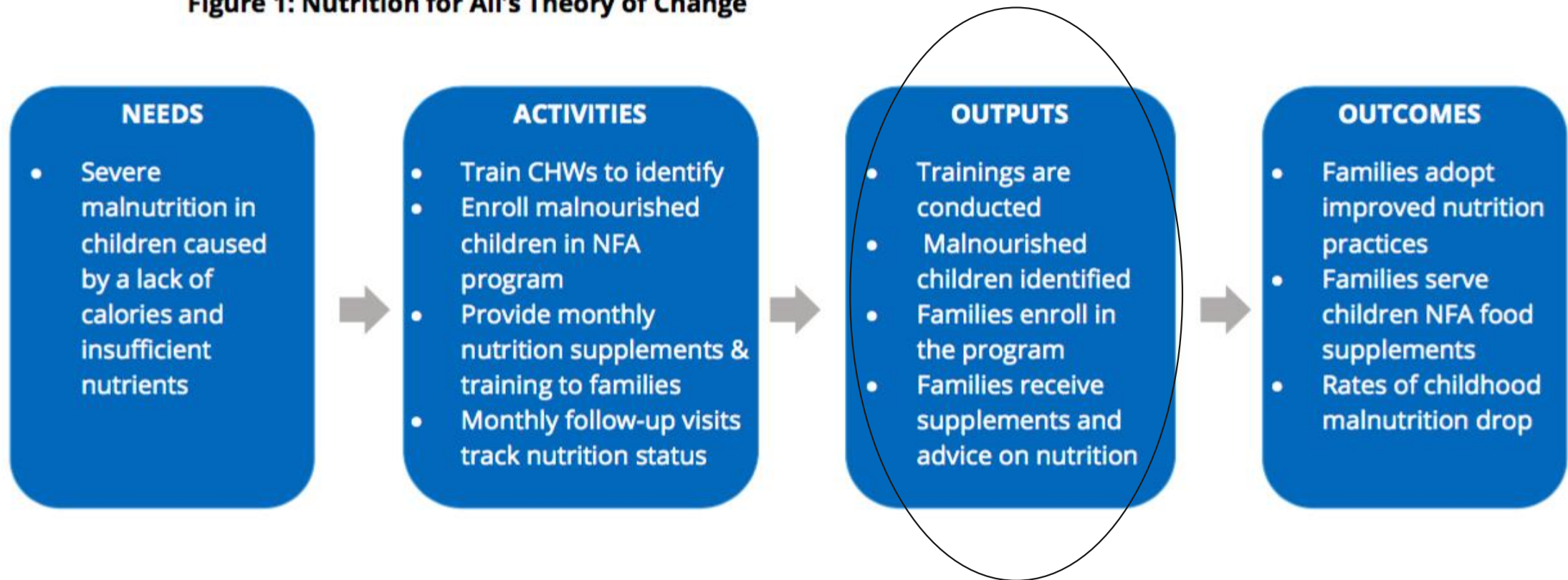




# What Do We Mean by Higher Up on the ToC?

## Example of a Theory of Change:

Figure 1: Nutrition for All's Theory of Change



\*The organization and its theory of change are fictional.



# How Do Nimble RCTs Differ from Traditional RCTs?

	Rapid-Fire RCTs for Product Design	Welfare Impact RCTs
Intervention	Usually a <b>low-cost modification</b> to an existing product	A modification to an existing product <b>or</b> an entirely new product.
Data Sources	Largely <b>administrative</b> (internal databases such as usage logs, transaction histories or click rates)	Administrative <b>&amp; survey</b> (including household survey collection)
Outcomes	Limited to first-order outcomes like <b>take-up and usage</b> of the product in question	<b>Welfare</b> outcomes such as income or consumption, as well as usage of complementary and substitutable products



# Pros & Cons





# Pros

- Credible insights into program design
- Quick results and highly actionable data
- Relatively low cost
- Useful first step



# Cons

- Limited outcomes measurement
- Limited ability to generate knowledge
- Small effect sizes
- They usually require large samples



# How to start?

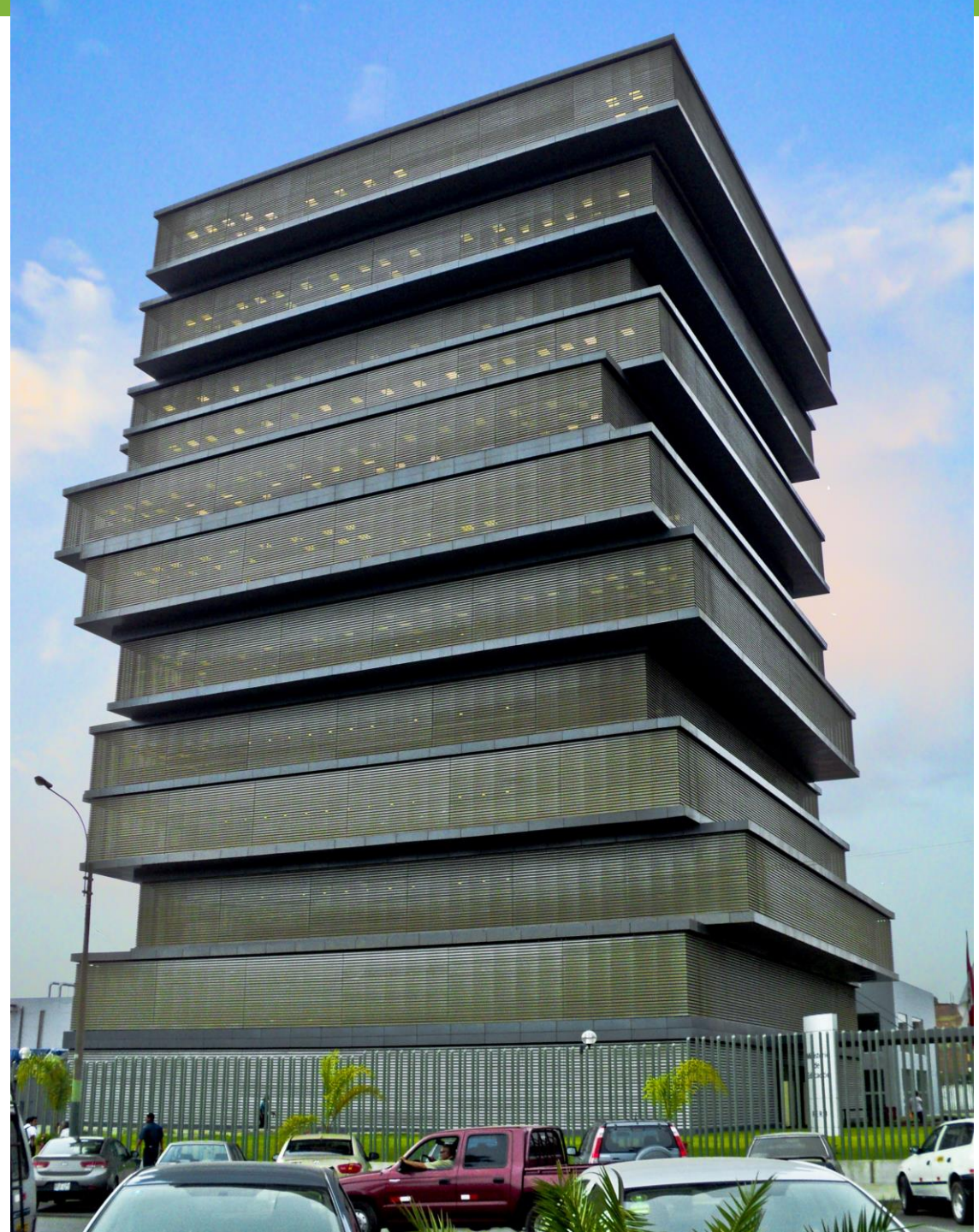
- Have practical question to tackle
- Embed staff with partner
- Test administrative data source, and process for pulling data
- Design series of tests. Do a few, then tweak and iterate.



# MineduLAB

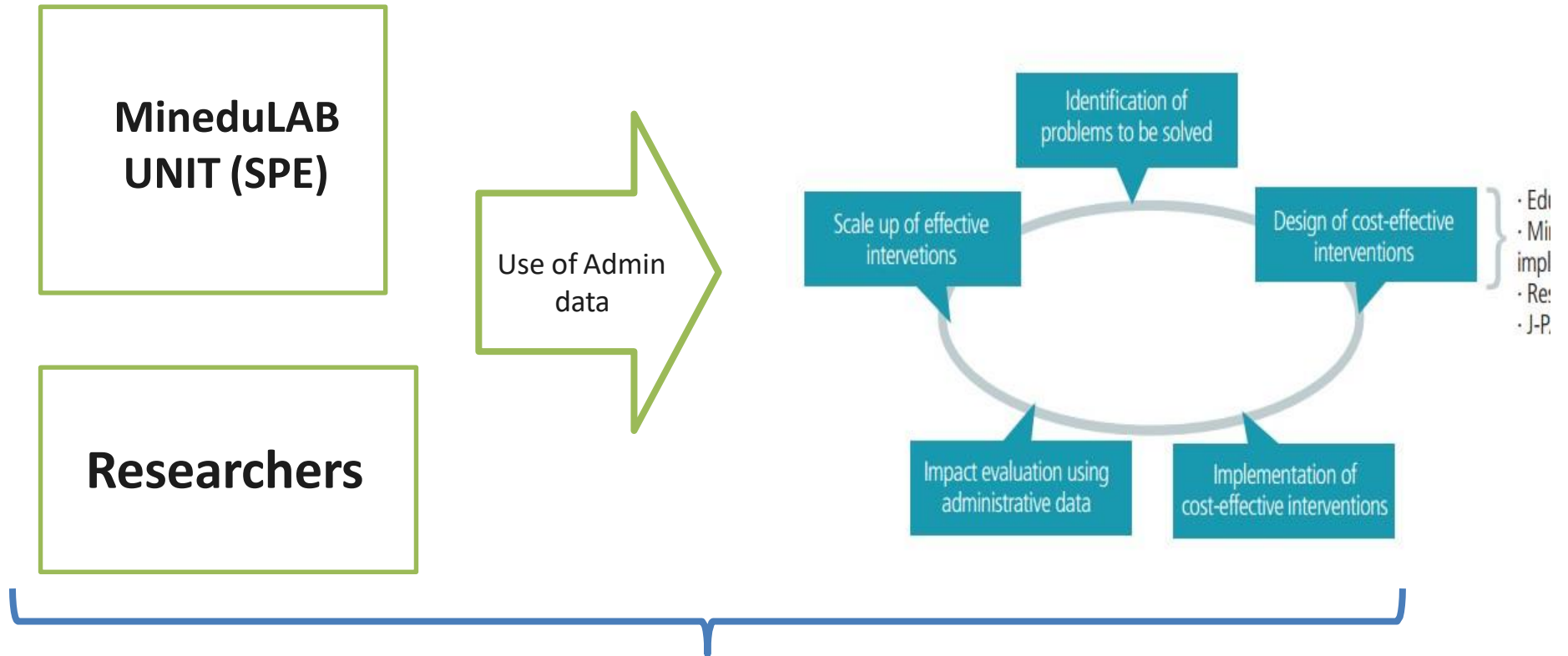
MineduLAB is an innovation lab for education policy housed within the government of Peru.

Ultimate goal: allowing the Ministry to use evidence to improve children's learning



# MineduLAB Structure

## EDULAB POLICY CYCLE



### IPA and J-PAL technical assistance

- Research support: Board of Researchers (F. Gallego, S. Galiani, C. Nielson) and one Research Manager.
- Institutionalization: Operational manual development, institutionalization strategies development, dissemination.





# MineduLAB

Institutionalize the production  
and use of evidence

Create an institutional learning unit within a  
(government) organization that allows for  
systematic incorporation of evidence in its policy  
cycle



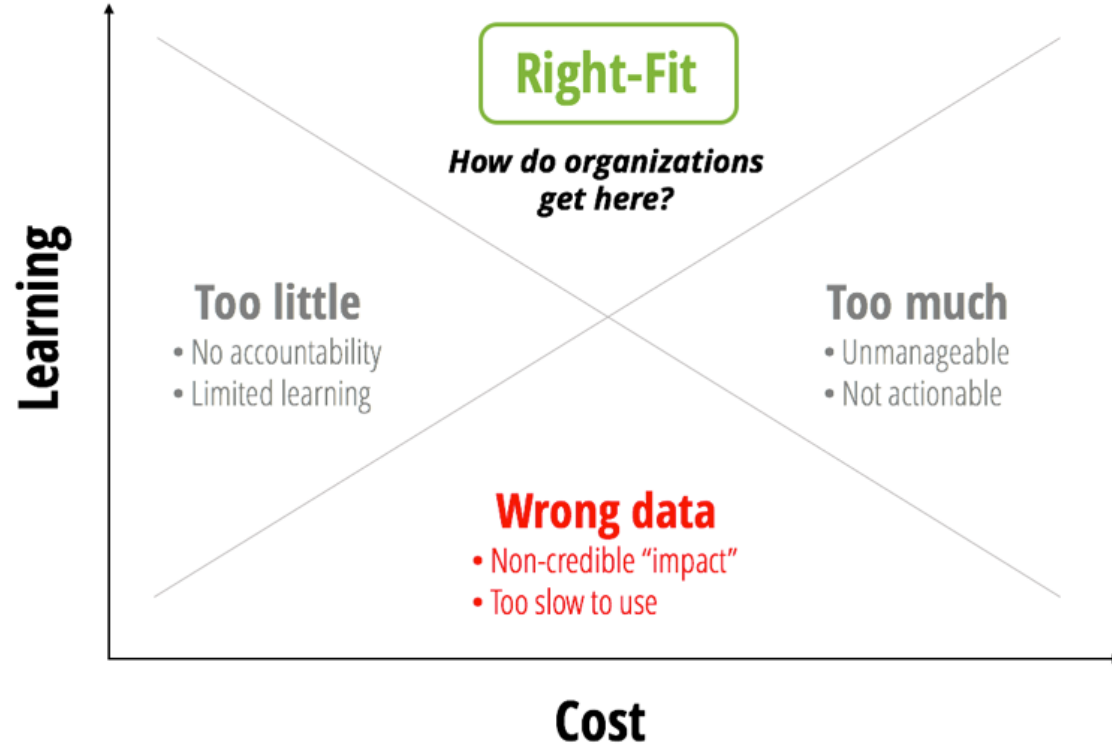
# Conclusion: Nimble RCTs

- A powerful methodology in the program and product design toolbox
- A rigorous and cost-saving measure
- A great way to adapt an evidence-backed program in a new context/with a different population
- A way to improve design through effective tweaks (not a way to measure overall programmatic impact).
- ***A complement, not substitute for welfare-measuring RCTs***



# IPA's Right Fit Evidence Unit

Helping organizations make learning-oriented M&E  
a reality in the development sector



# Thank you



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# Examples from IPA's Portfolio

**Text messages from bank → savings deposits & balances:** Varied gain/loss, mention of goal, etc.

**Text messages from bank → repayment of loans**

- **Success:** Philippines. Including Account Officer name → higher repayment
- **Failure:** Peru. Messed up randomization, re-randomized individuals each month

**Listening rates of messages in Liberia:** Testing listening rates of different audio messages aimed at reducing intimate partner violence as preliminary "lab" work

**Mobile money take-up in Pakistan:** Worked with Pakistan's leading mobile money provider, [Telenor Easypaisa](#), to explore ways to increase adoption and usage of the mobile money among unbanked poor

