

FIELD NOTES


Customization: The Key to Leveraging Everyone's Full Potential?

During the holidays, my family hosts a “benefit party.” It may be my favorite day of the year because it always feels transformative. I pre-select three charities based on a theme (this year was children’s rights), and the children who attend (aged 5 to 15) decide which charity will receive the proceeds from a raffle. They discuss the options among themselves and try to come up with arguments to build consensus around one option. They never seem to pick the obvious choice, and they always teach me something I didn’t know, provoking me to think about my own work in new ways. This year, one girl argued for a charity that does not offer one solution for all the kids that come through its door, instead tailoring solutions to the needs of the child. The girl insisted that kids need different things based on their situations, and a program that offers only financial services, for example, may not be addressing a child’s primary problem. She was impressed, instead, with an organization that helped an undocumented girl in New York to obtain a green card so that she could work and then begin to strive for college, saying: “If they had offered her something else, she still wouldn’t have gotten what she needed, her papers.”

Offering a single solution is appealing: we all want to have “the answer.” A simple model most likely is easier to implement and more scalable than customized approaches. But is it most effective in improving the lives of the poor and vulnerable? Our team recently visited Fundacion Paraguaya (FUPA), a mission-driven microfinance institution that works in Asuncion with vulnerable populations, including youth. FUPA recently implemented a “stoplight” tool that loan officers use to measure

various vulnerabilities of new clients’ families to help FUPA customize the services it offers. These problems may vary from family violence to a need for technical assistance with growing crops. Clients may be offered help directly or through partner organizations, and progress is measured over time. Clients were enthusiastic, noting that they were becoming agents of their own change.

The comments of a young girl and the experience of FUPA are thought-provoking. Perhaps we should not think about “products” or even “solutions” as interventions, because they can obfuscate the diversity of needs of the poor and vulnerable. Would it be possible for customization to be the “next big thing”? It may be costly - and complex - but the potential results make it worth examining in more depth. If customization will prove to be a game changer, then it may be time to start coming up with technologies and processes to make it cheaper to identify the specific needs of poor households, segment these needs and offer more highly customized solutions - possibly through a single trusted and convenient channel. FUPA employees already are using tablet computers to enter stoplight information into a web-based data management system. Perhaps customization can be a scalable concept after all: A girl can dream, don’t you think?

About the Author: Ms Barbara Magnoni is President of EA Consultants, a development-consulting firm based in New York. She has over 20 years of international finance and development experience and has worked with organizations including Goldman Sachs, Chase and BBVA and has advised institutions such as the International Finance Corporation, the US Agency for International Development and the International Labour Organization. She may be reached at +1 212 734 6461 or [bmagnoni\[at\]eac-global.com](mailto:bmagnoni[at]eac-global.com), or you may follow her on Twitter at [BarbaraatEA](#). 



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