

A conversation with Innovations for Poverty Action, February 27, 2018

Participants

- Heidi McAnnally-Linz – Associate Director of Policy and Communications, Innovations for Poverty Action
- Bethany Park – Policy Manager, Innovations for Poverty Action
- James Snowden – Research Consultant, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Ms. McAnnally-Linz and Ms. Park.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Ms. Park and Ms. McAnnally-Linz of Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) as part of its investigation into opportunities to influence developing country policy. Conversation topics included IPA's current policy work, MineduLAB (a partnership with the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)), and IPA's collaboration with other organizations.

Policy work

IPA's goal is for effective interventions to be implemented at scale. It also aims to build government ownership and engagement on these interventions, embedding them into government systems rather than conducting one-off scale-ups. In the past, IPA has not generally focused on policy outreach, since its comparative advantage was in building infrastructure that allows it to run studies in-country.

However, IPA suspects that policy engagement may be an integral part of the research process, and if this is the case, it is important for IPA to be involved in policy engagement on the ground from the beginning of projects. For this reason, IPA believes that it is better to take a more general approach to building partners' capacity to participate in creating and using evidence, rather than focusing specifically on scale-ups.

Policy staff

IPA has over 1000 people in ~20 countries, but very few of them work on policy. Ms. Park and Ms. McAnnally-Linz, who lead IPA's policy engagement work, estimate that IPA has a total of ~7.5 full-time-equivalent people working on policy, and another 5 people in communications work.

September 2018 update: IPA now has approximately 12 full-time equivalent people working on policy.

Impact

IPA has 18 case studies on the impact of IPA's work (<https://www.poverty-action.org/impact/case-studies>). These case studies document the course of events that led to a program's scale-up, and IPA's role in that work.

Projects in Ghana

IPA has been deeply involved in work on a number of projects with the Ghanaian Ministry of Education, and scale-ups of those projects are beginning to take place. IPA is working within the existing government systems to scale up the Teaching at the Right Level program (TaRL; see below) and exploring promising pathways to scaling the Quality Preschool for Ghana program and improving kindergarten quality in Ghana more broadly.

Second round evaluation of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)

Starting in September, IPA will roll out an evaluation of TaRL that includes ~300 schools in Ghana. Implementation will be led by the government. IPA will leverage existing systems by working in all of the school districts that are covered by UNICEF funding, and hopes to eventually scale TaRL up to all ~1000 schools in that area.

IPA believes that, pending positive results, it is highly likely that TaRL will be adopted as a formal part of the Ghanaian education system, because of the Ghanaian government's sustained enthusiasm and support for the program over time.

MineduLAB

MineduLAB is an IPA and J-PAL initiated embedded evidence lab in the Peruvian Ministry of Education, which employs administrative data to answer simple questions about low-cost educational interventions.

MineduLAB accepts research proposals, selects a few interventions for which to conduct small trials, and scales up those that it finds to be successful. The preliminary studies are funded by international aid agencies or by the Peruvian government.

Founding

MineduLAB was inspired by the Quipu Commission, a multi-year political process that brought many researchers and senior policymakers together to discuss Peruvian social programs. The Commission was a joint project of J-PAL, IPA, and several Peruvian organizations.

Scale-ups

MineduLAB has conducted three rounds of evaluations so far, and two of the programs from the first round are currently in the process of being scaled up.

SMS reminders

The first intervention being scaled up is a simple text message reminder to prompt principals to spend their school maintenance funds. Prior to this intervention, maintenance funds were disbursed to schools and then lost (for accounting purposes) because principals did not report on their expenditures. While the reminders played an important role in increasing accountability by significantly increasing the amount being reported as spent, it is unknown whether this intervention in fact increased school maintenance spending.

Returns to education

The second intervention being scaled up reduces school dropout by having schools show children informational videos about the returns to post-primary education. The scale-up for this intervention is in its final stages and will be incorporated into after-school tutoring programs across urban Peruvian schools this school year.

AYNI Lab Social

As a result of IPA and J-PAL's work on MineduLAB, the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS) reached out to IPA for assistance developing a similar program, AYNI Lab Social. The contract for AYNI Lab Social came directly from the Peruvian government.

Collaboration with other organizations promoting evidence-based development policy

Ms. McAnnally-Linz would like funders to encourage more collaboration among organizations such as IPA, Evidence Action, J-PAL, and the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie). Partnerships between these organizations have historically led to large successes, and Ms. McAnnally-Linz believes that if they were incentivized to collaborate more frequently and more effectively, they would each be more productive.

Differences between IPA and J-PAL

IPA and J-PAL are often compared to one another due to the fact that they work in very similar areas and often collaborate. The main difference between the two is the way they function as institutions: while J-PAL is a university-based, network-led institution, IPA is an NGO with a long-term presence in twenty country offices, working in close collaboration with many hundreds of researchers and partners. These different setups mean that the two institutions have different strengths, and because of this they often rely on one another.

Assessing the impact of different organizations

Collaboration between organizations can make it difficult to assess the impact of different organizations' policy work. For example, many of the successes reported by J-PAL's Government Partnership Initiative (GPI) are IPA successes as well; GPI has sub-granted to IPA for work in Colombia, Peru, and the Philippines.

In addition, different organizations count their projects differently – for example, J-PAL counts any project or study that its affiliates work on, while IPA counts anything that its staff work on or that its initiative funds. This means that there is large overlap between the projects that J-PAL and IPA count as part of their work. Therefore, it is difficult to assess whether an organization wishing to fund work of this type would get better results supporting J-PAL or IPA.

When a research organization partners effectively with other organizations, its contributions often do not receive public recognition, because it works more on research and development than on scale-up and implementation. For example, No Lean Season and school-based deworming would not have been possible without IPA's research at scale, but Evidence Action is (rightfully) more often credited for these interventions.

In particular, a research organization's engagement with partners is work that can be vital to the success of a project, but is often overlooked.

Actively maintaining partnerships

IPA maintains partnerships on the ground throughout the years that it takes to conduct research studies, up until someone is convinced to make a change, at which point IPA hands the project off to another party to scale up. These hand-offs might not be effective without IPA's active engagement of partners.

This engagement takes the form of IPA fielding questions from the partner about the study or about research in general, and preparing baseline briefs to help the partner understand the data coming out of the study. This builds trust between partners and IPA's policy staff, so that when an organization wants to do a scale-up, the work is easier because IPA already has good relationships with all of the relevant people.

Other work

Right Fit Evidence Unit

Understanding and improving randomized controlled trials (RCTs)

Right Fit Evidence is a new initiative at IPA that helps development organizations be better users of data and evidence. It connects with IPA's current work in that it helps IPA understand what drives results in RCTs, and how IPA can prepare people to conduct more effective RCTs. One way IPA can do this is by advising partners to help them discover implementation problems early on.

In the past, IPA has encountered situations in which implementation problems are only discovered after the RCT is over. In these cases, if the study finds that the intervention had no impact, it is impossible to know if the program itself does not work, or if the lack of impact is only due to problems with the implementation, so the RCT provides no information.

Other types of data and evidence

Right Fit Evidence is also intended to identify situations in which evaluation methods other than RCTs are more appropriate and help clients use the “right-fit” data and evidence for such situations. For example, when a program is at a stage where IPA believes it is ready to be scaled up, IPA has already determined that the program has an impact, often using an RCT, so a different kind of assessment is needed. In the case of TaRL, for instance, IPA is most interested in assessing whether teachers are in fact attending schools and implementing the program as planned. On the other hand, if an RCT is not appropriate, for example because the time is not right, IPA can help clients gather data to test their theory of change and improve their program implementation.

Follow-up work on growth charts in Zambia and Kenya

In 2017, IPA researchers conducted a study in Zambia, in which they found that stunting was reduced in households where they distributed charts indicating healthy heights for children of different ages and providing information about nutrition.

IPA is working with Evidence Action to pressure-test the growth chart model and determine how it might be scaled up. It is currently working with Evidence Action and the original researchers to do follow-up work with recipients of growth charts from the original study, in order to understand the results better.

Work in Zambia

Since implementation of the original growth charts intervention was led by IPA researchers, Zambian government health workers still need to run the intervention on a small scale before IPA decides it is ready to be scaled up. To this end, IPA plans to work with the Zambia National Food and Nutrition Commission, which is interested in growth charts.

Replication in Kenya

IPA’s follow-up work with Evidence Action is intended to help it more effectively replicate the growth chart study. The replication will most likely be done in Kenya.

With the potential work in Kenya, IPA and Evidence Action would aim to determine how to make the delivery of growth charts more effective at scale. It aims to embed growth chart distribution into existing structures rather than creating a new program. This will likely mean working with other large-scale partners in Kenya that already go door-to-door.

Other work in Zambia

In addition to growth charts, IPA is currently working on two other programs in Zambia:

- **Catch Up**, a TaRL program that aims to improve the basic literacy and numeracy skills of primary school students. This work is led by J-PAL Africa, in partnership with the IPA Zambia team.
- A potential scale-up with the Ministry of Education of **Girls Arise!**, “a training that [teaches] adolescent girls non-cognitive skills to negotiate health and educational decisions with authority figures in their lives.”

In addition to these specific scale-up opportunities, IPA is also pursuing a broader, sector-specific approach in Zambia, involving a larger engagement with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education. IPA suspects that this approach is what is leading to scale-up opportunities, and it is helped by the presence of an IPA policy associate in Zambia.

All GiveWell conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations>