

A conversation with the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, February 12, 2016

Participants

- Iqbal Dhaliwal – Deputy Director, Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)
- Claire Walsh – Policy Manager, J-PAL
- Elie Hassenfeld – Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Mr. Dhaliwal and Ms. Walsh.

Summary

As part of its work aiming to support potential top charities, GiveWell spoke with Mr. Dhaliwal and Ms. Walsh of J-PAL. Conversation focused on J-PAL's recently launched Government Partnership Initiative (GPI).

Overview of J-PAL

J-PAL's broad mission is to promote evidence-informed policy. Its three main activities toward this end are:

1. *Conducting fundamental research:* J-PAL's network of over 130 affiliated professors has about 700 ongoing or completed research projects that aim to identify which programs in development policy are effective, which are not, and why.
2. *Capacity building:* J-PAL aims to increase the use of evidence-informed decision-making and policy design by governments, international development organizations, NGOs, foundations, and impact investors.
3. *J-PAL Global Policy Group:* J-PAL's policy group has about 20 full-time employees at its Global headquarters and about 30 more in regional offices worldwide doing policy outreach. The Global office focuses on synthesizing evidence to produce concrete policy lessons that regional staff can use to aid policy decision-making in partnership with governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and non-profit foundations. J-PAL's policy outreach involves:
 - Making evidence accessible to policymakers by producing policy briefs from academic papers
 - Doing cost-effectiveness analysis
 - Collaborating with governments, non-profits, and development organizations in the field, both to share evidence and to find opportunities to scale up existing evidence-backed programs.
 - For example, J-PAL identified the opportunity to scale up deworming with the government in Bihar (where Evidence Action now works) and helped coordinate communication among the various parties involved, while Deworm the World led the actual scale up with the government.

The Government Partnership Initiative (GPI)

In most developing countries, the government is the largest entity involved in development, providing a large portion of development funding and often able to reach sectors of the population that NGOs do not reach.

However, J-PAL has found that some aspects of working with governments are more challenging relative to working with NGOs and non-profit foundations. For example, governments typically have to make policy decisions quickly, meaning that there are only short windows for policy to be informed by evidence, government personnel that J-PAL staff are working with may be transferred, and contracting laws and regulations may create delays in building partnerships between researchers and governments.

J-PAL believes its government collaborations will be most effective if it creates long-term partnerships with governments and has an opportunity to help governments change their decision-making culture to be more evidence-informed. To this end, J-PAL launched GPI in September 2015.

Types of GPI programs

J-PAL funds three types of activities through GPI:

1. *Policy-relevant research*: For example, a government that plans to try a direct-benefit transfer program (in lieu of rations or subsidies) may ask J-PAL do an RCT to determine whether the program leads to improvements in wealth and income, or if transfers are used to purchase temptation goods like alcohol or cigarettes, cause inflation in the local economy, etc.
2. *Scaling up existing projects*: J-PAL aims to identify interventions that have strong existing evidence of effectiveness but need funding or assistance to scale up, typically with a new partner (e.g., J-PAL's work with the government of Bihar and Evidence Action on deworming). For example:
 - J-PAL Africa is partnering with the Zambian government to translate the "teaching at the right level" approach first tested in partnership with Pratham in India, which has shown evidence of success with various implementers in India, Ghana, and Kenya, to Zambia.
3. *Promoting evidence-informed policymaking more broadly*: This is the most novel of GPI's activities, relative to J-PAL's traditional work. Examples include:
 - The mayor of Bogota has proposed working with Chris Blattman (Co-Chair for J-PAL's Crime Sector) to set up a rapid low-cost RCT lab to quickly identify potential ways to reduce crime in Bogota.
 - The government of West Bengal has proposed a program to quickly train and improve the skill of informal healthcare workers, and scale this program up to cover the whole state in the next two years.

All organizations that receive grants through GPI must either have a J-PAL affiliate or regional J-PAL office involved to provide support

Funding

GPI's first round of requests for proposals (RFP) was funded in December, and a second round of RFP is currently underway.

Initially, J-PAL planned to grant \$250,000 through GPI per quarter for first 3 years. However, J-PAL received much more demand than expected, receiving \$1.5 million in requests from the first round of RFP and \$2 million in requests from the second round from about 30 projects total.

J-PAL has a total budget of \$2.8 million from donors to fund grants through GPI. J-PAL allocated about \$1 million of this \$2.8 million to these first two rounds of RFP. GPI is seeking additional funding due to the large volume of high-quality proposals it is receiving.

Other potential funders for GPI

J-PAL has existing relationships with a number of large foundations. However, funding from many of these groups is typically program-oriented (that is, earmarked for specific sectors like health or education), and GPI's broad goal of promoting evidence-informed policymaking across all sectors does not fit as neatly into existing program descriptions. J-PAL is exploring how to best present its program to organizations that may be interested in contributing funding.

Organizations like the Global Innovation Fund (GIF) and Development Innovation Ventures (DIV) have their own evaluation criteria and mechanisms for grants, and do not contribute funding to general funds (like GPI's) for re-granting. GIF and DIV might consider directly funding some of the same proposals as GPI has received, but applicants would need to apply to them separately.

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