

A conversation with Iqbal Dhaliwal, February 16, 2018

Participants

- Iqbal Dhaliwal – Executive Director, Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab; Co-Chair, Government Partnership Initiative
- James Snowden – Research Consultant, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give a non-verbatim overview of the major points made by Mr. Iqbal Dhaliwal.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Mr. Dhaliwal of the Government Partnership Initiative (GPI) at the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) about J-PAL and GPI. Conversation topics included J-PAL's most significant achievements, what J-PAL has learned since it was founded, and GPI's models of success.

J-PAL's most significant achievements

Generating research on policy relevant issues

J-PAL and its partner organization Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) have created efficient permanent ground operations in many countries that have made it much easier for researchers to run field RCTs. These field operations not only help collect primary survey data in challenging conditions, but have also built deep partnerships with implementing organizations (governments, non-profits, etc.) that facilitate the matching of policymakers and researchers to work on highly policy-relevant issues. J-PAL affiliated professors have over 800 completed and ongoing RCTs in over 70 countries.

Promoting and facilitating the use of evidence in policymaking

J-PAL has made RCT evidence more accessible, and has demonstrated through its partnership work that evidence can be used as an input in policy decision-making. Dozens of governments and non-profits around the world now partner with J-PAL and its network of professors to help them improve at implementing evidence-informed policy.

The increased use of evidence in policy decision-making is a success of not only J-PAL, but of the broader network of organizations that focus on evidence-informed interventions for global development, including J-PAL, Evidence Action, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), the Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA) at UC-Berkeley, Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD) at Harvard, IDinsight, and of funders like the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the UK's Department for International Development, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), and the Global Innovation Fund (GIF), among others.

Scale-ups of programs found to be effective

J-PAL affiliated researchers, staff, and partner organizations' work has contributed to scale-ups of many effective programs, such as the Targeting the Ultra-Poor program/the Graduation Approach created by BRAC, Bandhan, and others, Pratham's Teaching at the Right Level approach, and school-based deworming. This has been a clear demonstration of the potential of evidence to inform large scale-ups. More information about the largest examples of these scale-ups is available on J-PAL's website (<https://www.povertyactionlab.org/scale-ups>).

Applying academic research to policy issues

Policy outreach

Once evidence about the effectiveness of an intervention has been found, it is necessary to do policy outreach regardless of how strong the evidence is, because even if the evidence about the intervention is publicly available and shared widely on the internet, many people will still be unaware of it.

For example, J-PAL recently completed an education technology review paper that emphasized a finding that had been known for a long time that giving free computers to children is not effective on its own at improving learning beyond computer skills. Though organizations focused on evidence-based philanthropy have known this result for several years, many governments and non-profits are unaware of the evidence and are still giving children laptops, tablets, or smartphones without changing pedagogy and without a clear theory of change for how it will improve learning. J-PAL's work includes formalizing evidence in academic papers, policy summaries, speaking with government and philanthropic actors about the state of the evidence, and collaborating with them directly to support them in applying evidence in policies and programs.

Example: deworming in India

In 2004, J-PAL affiliated professors Edward Miguel and Michael Kremer released a paper (http://cega.berkeley.edu/assets/cega_research_projects/1/Identifying-Impacts-on-Education-and-Health-in-the-Presence-of-Treatment-Externalities.pdf) suggesting that school-based deworming might be a highly cost-effective intervention. Though the results were strong and actionable in contexts with high worm prevalence in India like Bihar state, J-PAL recognized that the paper alone would not be enough to influence policy, so it met with officials in the state health department in Bihar to present the results, hosted a conference to get wider buy-in, and conducted outreach on the topic with policymakers in Bihar. This work opened the doors for Evidence Action's Deworm the World Initiative to start working with the government of Bihar in 2011, which led to the deworming of more than 23 million children in the state, and then to national scale-up of the deworming program in 2015.

J-PAL's thinking over the past 15 years

Partnerships

Many of J-PAL affiliates' early research or policy outreach projects were structured around a specific program or intervention. However, over time J-PAL has found that the fixed costs of establishing partnerships are large, so J-PAL will be more effective if it builds lasting institutional relationships with fewer governments and non-profits and encourages a culture of evidence-informed policy among them than if it diffuses its efforts over many projects with many different governments. GPI is a manifestation of this ideology.

Choosing departments to work with

In its early days, J-PAL would only approach specific government line departments depending on the nature of the program it was working on. For example, it worked with the Ministry of Health for deworming, and the Ministry of Education for Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL).

Mr. Dhaliwal now believes that it is better to go to the Chief Minister's Office, the Finance Department, or the Planning Department, because these bodies work with all of the departments in the government. Finance departments are also the most naturally aligned with the project of evidence-informed policy, because they are the departments best equipped to understand cost-effectiveness analyses and cost-benefit analyses and prioritize longer-term development over shorter-term goals. Having an over-arching general agreement with the government makes it much easier to start discussions and work with line departments on specific programs.

Organizations vs individuals

In working with governments, there are two main strategies for choosing partners: one can either reach out to a particular high-priority department, or one can reach out to a particular individual who believes in strengthening the use of evidence in policymaking, regardless of that person's department. While it is often a good idea to work with a particular government department, Mr. Dhaliwal believes it is even more important to identify the individuals who understand the importance of evidence and are able to turn it into action.

Summary of J-PAL's learnings

Mr. Dhaliwal believes that the ideal way to find partners is to:

- choose a few governments to explore working with,
- set up conversations to see if they are interested in collaborating when elections have just happened so that the regime is stable for four or five years, and
- identify a key champion of evidence-informed policymaking, either in the Chief Minister's Office or overarching departments like Finance or Planning to anchor an institutional partnership with J-PAL where the

government and J-PAL collaborate on a combination of research, policy, and/or capacity building.

Communication

Mr. Dhaliwal feels that J-PAL could have communicated more proactively about its mission and emphasis on collaborating with policymakers, implementing partners, and donors. This has led to some people misunderstanding J-PAL's work. This lack of communication was due to a focus on getting the work done rather than communications, and the fact that J-PAL assumed that others understood its mode of thinking and operations, but it has since realized that this is not always the case.

For example, to focus its staff resources on summarizing and disseminating research rather than writing about how research gets used in policy, J-PAL set a very high internal bar for what to put on its website. For a long time J-PAL would not publish any story about the contribution of a specific evaluation to policy unless there was a scale-up, and unless that scale-up reached at least hundreds of thousands or millions of people. This meant that many success stories of evidence informing programs and policies along dimensions like change in program design or preventing the scale-up of an ineffective program, scale-ups that reached a large number of people but less than a million, and research informing critical policy discussions and donor funding, have not yet made it to its website or been disseminated.

Collaborating from the design phase

J-PAL's goal is to find and work with implementing partners as they develop the interventions that are most likely to have a big influence on poverty reduction. J-PAL wants to work with its partner organizations to evaluate programs that it thinks have a high chance of working. Another reason that it prefers to collaborate with implementers on RCTs beginning at the design phase is that a lot of the feedback and learning from other related research worldwide happens at that stage. If the partner is open to collaboration on aspects of the initial program design, it can help lead to a well thought out program, and also signals that the implementer will be willing to later use the results of the RCT to inform program design.

It is because of this belief that J-PAL has consistently turned down opportunities to collaborate with organizations that commission external evaluations that are already completely designed, i.e. the model of collaboration in which the funder has finalized all program design, and even details of treatment arms to be evaluated in an RCT, and then asks an evaluator to run that RCT and deliver a report on whether the program worked or not.

Organizations working on evidence-based global development

There are a few evaluation organizations that focus on evidence-based interventions for global development. In addition to J-PAL, some of the other organizations in this space include:

- Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA)
- International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)
- International Growth Center (IGC)
- Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD) at Harvard
- The Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA) at UC-Berkeley
- IDinsight

Several of these organizations were funded by the first wave of philanthropy that came out of the tech boom of the early 2000s and many bilateral/multilateral donors that expressed that they were interested in funding organizations based on their ability to show evidence of their effectiveness. Several of these organizations share affiliated professors, and often work closely together when their specializations complement one another.

There is a particularly close partnership between J-PAL and IPA. They do not have offices in the same countries, and both have research operations only in countries where they have offices. J-PAL takes a regional rather than a country approach to policy outreach and training, so it supplements IPA's policy-training work where IPA has a country office.

J-PAL's distinguishing characteristics

Academic network

The foremost thing that separates J-PAL from other academic centers is that it has an unusually wide research network, with over 160 affiliated researchers from 50+ universities worldwide, most beyond its six host universities (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Paris School of Economics, University of Cape Town, Institute for Financial Management and Research, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, and University of Indonesia). This is a unique model because most research centers do not allow affiliation beyond the university.

J-PAL sees its academic network as an advantage because their academic freedom means that these researchers are free from organizational/employer constraints and they think very creatively to expand the boundaries of what is possible in anti-poverty programs. J-PAL affiliated researchers often work closely with implementers to co-design novel interventions to test key questions that policy makers confront, and also provide insights to implementers to design programs by working with them from the initial stages. Organizations that work in a consulting capacity mostly have to work with an already final program and are required to only deliver on an existing vision.

Policy work

J-PAL has a much larger permanent policy group than most of the other organizations in the space. This is made possible by a combination of J-PAL's endowment, which frees it from many of the constraints that other organizations face, and also because of a number of policy-specific grants that it has received from donors in the past.

Grounding in host universities

Because every J-PAL office is based at a local university, it is more difficult for it to establish local branches than it is for an organization like IPA, because it has to find a local university to partner with first. The long-term advantage of this model is that J-PAL benefits from collaborating with a university in terms of research, policy networks, trainings, and graduates who choose to work at J-PAL, and in turn helps build capacity of local researchers and staff on evaluations. In this way, it contributes to building local research capacity, and has created connections between researchers and policymakers that will allow the work to greatly expand.

GPI grant proposal evaluation

Decision-making process

The GPI Advisory Board comprises seven members: Mr. Dhaliwal and Dr. Abhijit Banerjee, who are GPI's co-chairs, as well as five review board members. The review board includes one affiliated researcher with extensive experience in each of J-PAL's geographical regions, so that for every proposal there is someone on the board who understands the regional research and policy context.

Once the proposals have been received, Claire Walsh (Senior Policy Manager, J-PAL) and Samantha Carter (Policy Associate, J-PAL) create a matrix of the sectors and regions covered by each proposal, then map that matrix to the sectoral and regional expertise of the seven advisory board members, and allocate the projects accordingly.

Simultaneously with creating the matrix, Ms. Walsh and Ms. Carter reach out to the regional offices under whose ambit the project was submitted, and ask several questions, including:

- Is the proposed partnership or research question policy-relevant for the government and region?
- What other organizations might be trusted to provide input on this question?
- If this partnership and/or study succeeds, do you also think other policymakers will be interested in the results?

The board looks at the information Ms. Walsh and Ms. Carter have collected, reviews the proposals, reads the letters submitted by implementing policy partners, and then meets for several hours to make a decision on each proposal.

Considerations for evaluating grant proposals

For some of J-PAL's initiatives, such as the Governance Initiative (GI), J-PAL's main criterion for evaluating a grant proposal is how well the proposal answers policy-relevant research questions and addresses research gaps. GPI takes this into consideration, but for GPI the long-term potential of the partnership to increase the use of evidence in policy is more important.

When Mr. Dhaliwal reviews grant proposals for GPI, he is most interested in the partner's commitment to using evidence in decision-making in the long term. To this end, he wants to know:

- **Who is the partner that GPI will be working with?**
 - One important consideration is how long the person who spearheaded the proposal will remain in their current office. Many people lose their positions when the government changes, so GPI prefers to begin working with partners shortly after an election or when the next elections are still at least several months away to allow time for the project to get established on the ground.
- **What is the partner's motivation for wanting to work with GPI?**
 - Some applicants are only interested in changing one specific program or using evidence to justify an existing political position. GPI wants partners who see the partnership as a vehicle to expand the use of evidence to have better-informed decision-making in the long term and across many policies and programs.
- **Can the partner sustain their commitment of their own resources over time?**

Changing institutional culture

While Mr. Dhaliwal is excited about concrete scale-up projects such as the funds flow reform scale-up in India and the TaRL scale-up in Zambia, which have the potential to help governments reach millions of people with a relatively small monetary investment, he is even more excited about the potential for long-term organizational change.

Mr. Dhaliwal hopes that after a few years of partnership with GPI, implementing partners will have stronger and more established systems of using evidence to help inform program design and policy decisions. He will be disappointed if four years from now more governments or departments have not internalized the use of evidence to guide decision-making.

Measuring GPI's performance

If partnering with GPI can encourage more governments to internalize the fact that evidence can be used in decision-making, this will lead to many more projects that are at least as effective as the fund flow reform scale-up that GPI provided support to. Looking at these projects will be a way of quantifying culture change.

For example, in partnership with GPI's work in Tamil Nadu state in India, the state government recently released a circular that requires the government to use evidence to justify its recommendation of any project with a budget above ~\$23 million, and sets down guidelines for what evidence is permissible. A few years from now one might be able to measure GPI's impact by asking the government of Tamil Nadu how many programs were put forward based on rigorous evidence, how many people those programs reached, and what impacts those programs had. However,

the answers to these questions will only capture part of the impact of the culture change, because the requirement for evidence will also prevent the government from expending resources on an untold number of ineffective or less effective programs.

Methods of instigating organizational change

Even when there is a policy-relevant RCT that shows very positive results, governments are unlikely to adopt it unless someone creates a concrete plan for implementation. J-PAL has found that funding a small amount of staff to help government officials create such a plan is very helpful for supporting them in making reforms happen.

Example: MineduLAB

MineduLAB, an innovation unit within the Peruvian Ministry of Education, is an example of J-PAL and IPA building institutional capacity for better systems of evidence use. MineduLAB solicits project ideas from various departments and ministries that are involved in education. The ideas are tested in RCTs, and those that are found to be effective are scaled up. All projects are required to be low-cost, and their performance must be measurable with administrative data that is already collected.

IPA and J-PAL received a grant to provide technical assistance to the Peruvian Ministry of Education to set up the lab, create the operations manual, establish the process for soliciting research proposals, and bring in academic researchers to be partners on the RCTs. IPA and J-PAL then managed MineduLAB for a year, after which the Ministry of Education took over all operations.

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