Innovations for Poverty Action

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Date
April 25, 2023

My $100 Bill: Reflections from Loïc Watine about Putting Evidence to Work

If you've spent time with an economist, you've probably had the privilege of hearing some variation of this joke: Two economists are walking down the street. The first economist stops and says, "*Hey, didn't we just pass a $100 bill on the ground?*" *The second economist replies,* "*Don't bother. If it were a real $100 bill, someone would have already picked it up.*" In a perfect market, the theory says, all valuable opportunities should already be taken advantage of. In practice though, the world is imperfect and from time to time someone does find their version of a $100 bill.

After many years in different roles at Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), I recently took on the position of Chief Research and Policy Officer (CRPO). At its core, the role is about connecting evidence to policy and practice. Discovering what works and what doesn't in the fight against poverty is not enough; real change happens when that information is communicated to policymakers and practitioners who then act on it. The reason I am so excited about this role is that I see connecting evidence to policy and practice as the $100 bill of international development.

Recently, there has been a big acceleration in the generation of evidence: there are now over 10,500 impact evaluations recorded on 3ie's Development Evidence Portal, more than half of which were published in 2018-2022 alone. Despite notable successes like Teaching at the Right Level Africa and the Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative, turning all that evidence into policy and practice has typically been a much slower process. Imagine ten years from now a world where the growth of evidence use has matched the growth of evidence generation.

As CRPO, I am thrilled to take up that challenge. As a start, I want to share how IPA's mental models have evolved when it comes to connecting evidence to policy over our 20 years of existence.

IPA 1.0: More evidence

Enabling evidence-informed policy and practice was always the core idea behind IPA. In the first decade after IPA's founding in 2002, however, the main focus was on creating evidence. There simply was not enough rigorous impact evaluation in the development sector. So we were (and still are) working with some of the best researchers to implement high-quality studies on the ground.

I joined IPA in 2010. At the time, as our Mali country director, my agenda was driven almost exclusively by academics. The inherent assumption was that evidence that was academically relevant would ultimately find its use in policy and practice. In that period, IPA worked on important studies that produced major impacts in the real world, from Free Malaria Bednets to Cash Transfers. But even as we were influencing global debates, we were starting to realize that the unique presence IPA had built across close to 20 countries was an opportunity to do much more to intentionally influence policy and practice.

IPA 2.0: Co-creation

As a result, forming and deepening long-term partnerships with local decision-makers became a major theme in our 2013-2018 Strategic Plan. We quickly grasped that policymakers, just like anyone else, were much more interested in results from research that they had been involved with. So wherever possible, we started seeking opportunities for co-creation.

I was an internal principal investigator for IPA in 2013-2014, co-leading a four-country study on preprimary education in Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana. Among those, IPA had the closest government relationships in Ghana. This allowed us to co-create, with the Ghana Education Service, the Ghana part of the study in a way that would speak to their questions. This was only the start of the conversation—more and larger co-created research followed. Unsurprisingly, almost ten years later, Ghana is the country where we got the furthest in terms of informing preprimary education policy. The recent National Kindergarten Policy is heavily informed by evidence, and we anticipate that the new policy will positively impact the development of millions of young children nationwide in the coming years, thanks to the efforts of key partners like GES, UNICEF, Right to Play, Sabre Education, and many others, including academic researchers conducting transformational research. The lesson was clear: engaging with policymakers in the co-creation of research made it more likely they would ultimately use the findings to shape policy.

IPA 3.0: Evidence use from within

By 2018, IPA had deepened its relationships with policymakers and other practitioners in many of its country offices. We pushed that thinking further when designing our 2018-2025 Strategic Ambition. Evidence still needs to be created—and ideally co-created—and it still needs to be shared with the right people at the right time. But through our new strategic ambition, we have become more intentional about equipping governments and other partners to generate and use evidence themselves, so this process is baked into the system. That's when I took on the challenge of launching IPA's Right-Fit Evidence Unit, an advisory unit focused on helping funders, NGOs, social businesses, and governments to create their own data and evidence-related strategies and approaches. At the same time, IPA's growing Policy team developed and implemented the concept of Embedded Evidence Labs. The idea behind these labs is to incubate a team within a government organization, with the purpose of strengthening the use of data and evidence in public policy. This develops within the government a permanent infrastructure that integrates data and evidence into decision-making processes, ultimately delivering more effective programs and policies. It is exciting to see governments taking the lead on co-creating research agendas, improving and leveraging administrative data, and engaging in other data and evidence work (while IPA and other external researchers maintain the role of external evaluators, as needed). This model has gained considerable traction, with 17 embedded labs that are either active or in the pipeline worldwide.

This agenda of connecting evidence to policy and practice is not only about deepening our work with governments. Moving forward we also want to continue to further the leadership of local researchers in the kind of research and policy work that we do; we want to support funders in creating an environment that fosters evidence generation and use; and finally, we want to work more on the promising evidence-based interventions that have emerged across our various sector programs and proactively move them along the path to scale (watch this space for an upcoming publication on those emerging "best bets").

As I start my role of leading this agenda for IPA, I am looking forward to hearing from and

working with you all—IPA colleagues, researchers, government or NGO partners, funders—on making sure that we don’t walk by this huge $100 bill.