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Date

March 02, 2023

IPA at 20: Reflections from Executive Director Annie Duflo

For 20 years, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) has created and used evidence to improve the lives of the millions of people around the world—almost nine percent of humanity—who live in poverty.

Working with partners, we have asked questions and implemented rigorous research around what works, and what does not, to improve lives and ensure that investments in global development are based on more than just good intentions. We have supported the use of evidence and data in numerous countries and contexts and helped build a culture of evidence-informed decision-making across the development sector. It is conservatively estimated that IPA's work has affected over 300 million people around the globe.



Ghanaian kindergarten students break for lunch at a primary school in which IPA evaluated teacher training. © 2016 Rachel Stevenson

Dean Karlan began IPA 20 years ago because he saw there was a lack of rigor, data, and

evidence about what works to help those who live in poverty. He saw that billions of dollars were being invested in global development programs annually, but those investments were rarely guided by robust evidence and data. Dean founded IPA to generate and use evidence to reduce poverty, hence our motto: more evidence, less poverty.

But even Dean did not envision an organization that 20 years later has completed 900+ studies, working together with hundreds of researchers, practitioners, and decision-makers. Nor did he foresee that IPA would one day have a long-term presence in 20 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America with more than 500 full-time staff, most of whom come from and are based in the countries where we have offices. But far more important than this organizational growth is the real impact we have achieved by working with partners to help change the lives of people living in poverty.

Our recent work includes increasing mask use to prevent the spread of disease in India, using data to refine education programming in Peru, and improving teacher training in Ghana. Additional case studies demonstrating IPA's impact can be found on our website.

Achieving this impact wasn't easy. It is the result of years of building a high-quality research infrastructure, while also understanding how our research can shape policy and create change on the ground. One essential lesson we have learned—which underpins our 2025 Strategic Ambition—is that a strong, long-term country presence and staff are key to IPA's impact. Our local connections support high-quality research and the cultivation of deep, long-lasting relationships needed to effectively engage with decision-makers and ensure the evidence we generate is co-created, relevant, and put to use. At the same time, IPA's geographic spread enables us to have a larger impact by producing globally-relevant evidence and sharing lessons across different contexts.

Our strategy, therefore, requires a careful balance of depth and breadth, with a focus on geographic and sectoral areas where opportunities for impact are the highest. Developing evidence is only part of the equation; we also need to foster an approach where data is used to shape policy. This is why we seek to equip decision-makers to use data and evidence, through our Embedded Labs and Right-Fit Evidence unit.

Going forward, we will continue to push the boundaries of research to help address some of the big challenges of our time, including our recent focus on human trafficking and forced displacement. We will work to push forward along the path to scale some of the most promising ideas emerging from our research. And building on what we have learned, we will continue to work hand in hand with governments and other partners to institutionalize the use of evidence-informed policymaking. We will do this with a focus on co-creation and a grounding in the countries where we work, including an increased engagement with local researchers and research institutions.

Whether you have been with us since the beginning 20 years ago or just joined us, we thank you for being a part of this journey and for sharing IPA's vision of a world with more evidence and less poverty.

