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Priorities and Transitions: An Interview with Annie Duflo and Dean Karlan, Part 1

Last month, Annie Duflo assumed the executive directorship of IPA, replacing Dean Karlan, who will stay on as President. Annie has been with IPA for over three years serving as Vice President and Research Director. With this shift in leadership, we wanted to sit down with Annie and Dean to hear directly from them about what lies ahead for IPA in the coming year.



Interviewer: In 2012 IPA will celebrate its tenth anniversary. What was the motivation for appointing an executive director after ten years without one, and what do you see IPA doing differently as a result?

Dean: IPA was at a point in its growth trajectory where we needed to have a full time leader and manager to run all aspects of what now is a large and global organization. There's no magic story about matching our 10-year anniversary to this particular milestone. The tongue-in-cheek way that I think about it is that we are basically a \$25 million, 500-employee NGO, with an unpaid, volunteer part-time executive director, and that's just crazy.

The other thing that was striking for me, on a more personal level, is that when the topic of hiring an executive director came up, at no time did a single person in my life ever say to me, "Why would you do that?" They all said, "Of course, Dean, why aren't you doing that already?"

Interviewer: You're staying on as president. What does this enable or open up for you?

Dean: On a personal level, it allows me to focus more on my own research. With IPA, it allows me to focus my activities on helping to build up our capacity, create new initiatives, attract more researchers and achieve our policy aspirations.

Interviewer: Annie, what do you see as your top three priorities for IPA in the next 12-24 months?

Annie: We've been growing tremendously in the last few years and I expect that growth to continue, because there is also growing demand for rigorous evaluations from practitioners

and donors, and from researchers.

As that growth happens, it's very important to ensure that the quality of the research remains really high and that we keep innovating to conduct even higher quality research. We need to be a leader, for example, in measuring outcomes, or in computer-assisted interviewing—which is a new, more effective way to collect data.

A second priority is ensuring the policy relevance of our research. We are already focusing on this in a few ways. We are partnering with policy stakeholders and practitioners in specific sectors as we develop our research initiatives, to identify and pursue the questions they need answered. We need to build more initiatives of that type..

Another way, to ensure our policy relevance is to leverage our main strength - our presence on the ground, especially our country offices. We now have 14 country offices (most of them were officially registered, and 8 of them were created, in the last three years). Those offices are not just taking direction from New Haven or IPA researchers in conducting impact evaluations, but we are also now asking for and expecting their input to identify the key research areas and policy stakeholders in their countries, and to find ways to answer important questions.

And the last effort around promoting policy relevance is to build strategic partnerships. Some partnerships are more likely to result in long-term impact in the world. For example, working with governments can be challenging, but also very rewarding, because when the evaluation is completed and shows positive results, the government is more likely to scale the actual program.

Of course, all of this requires the capacity to run these evaluations. We have in the past mostly worked on research that is both policy relevant and exciting to academics, but there are still a lot of questions that policymakers want to know about but that are not necessarily of the highest interest for academics. We need not only to keep expanding our network, but also to build internal capacity to answer these questions.

Fortunately, we are in a position to do that now because our growth over the past three years has given us a core of highly skilled and experienced staff members who are now perfectly able to run evaluations.

The third priority, with research quality and policy relevance, is translating research into practice. Our goal is not only to understand what works and what doesn't, but also to make sure that these findings get translated into the real world. We are working to do that by proactively disseminating findings to policy makers and development practitioners who can put that knowledge into practice. For this purpose, using the connections that we have through our country offices is key. The second aspect of translating research into practice is thinking about how we contribute to bringing effective programs to scale. We've made a lot of progress in this area with the Teachers Community Assistant Initiative (TCAI) in Ghana, school based deworming and chlorine dispensers, but there is a lot more to learn, about how to do this and what role IPA can play. In the next few years I want to build IPA's capacity to

contribute to this.

Interviewer: We've talked about the areas where IPA wants to focus for the next few years. Is there anything that you are often asked to do that you aren't going to participate in?

Annie: One thing that we won't compromise on is quality. Sometimes we are asked to do evaluations in a way that wouldn't fit our quality standards, and that's something that we don't consider. There are also cases where we are asked to just do a survey. The idea is that a survey company gets a questionnaire and sends people around to collect the answers, but we don't do that. We need to be involved in the overall project, the study design, its objectives, the liaison with the partner organization, and results dissemination. In other words, IPA aims to identify key policy questions, to answer them by implementing high quality impact evaluations in partnership with researchers and practitioners, and to have an impact on the world by ensuring that these findings influence policy.

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