

**Authors**

Radha Rajkotia

## 5 Things You Might Not Know About IPA (I Admit, I Didn't)

In March of this year, I joined IPA as its Chief Research and Policy Officer, a relatively new role that was created, in short, to help IPA fulfill its mission of creating a world with more evidence and less poverty. Over the months of first learning more about and then starting at IPA, I have gained a deeper understanding of the people and projects here and I have to say: **the organization I'm seeing on the inside is a bit different from what my impression was on the outside.**

Let me explain.

Like many people in the international development field (before joining IPA I was at the International Rescue Committee for 11 years, most recently leading the Economic Recovery and Development team), I had long thought of IPA as the leading organization in conducting and promoting RCTs in the development sector. I have also thought of IPA as an organization obsessed with rigor. After seeing the organization from the inside, I believe that reputation is warranted. What I had not known until I began learning about this role at IPA, however, is **the extent to which the organization has prioritized making its research relevant to policymakers or to actively moving evidence to policy with the explicit goal of improving the lives of people living in poverty** (on that, you should read IPA'S [2025 Strategic Ambition](#) if you haven't yet).

Specifically, here are some things that have made an impression on me (and may be new to you too):

### 1. *It's not all RCTs*

IPA definitely considers RCTs to be the best way to establish a causal link between a program and its impacts on people's lives (and to identify what elements are driving the impacts), but the organization is open to other rigorous methods and to qualitative work as a complement to its traditional RCT work. In fact, I've found that IPA is doing a lot of research to advance its mission that's not traditional multi-year RCTs. From 'nimble RCTs' (like [this one in Colombia](#)), which enable iteration of the intervention design between tests, to panel data surveys (like [this one in Bangladesh](#)), which will make available panel data on Rohingya refugees living in Cox's Bazar, to studies using human-centered design to inform intervention design (like [this study](#)). I have seen that IPA is flexible and wants to conduct work that will not only yield good data but be useful to decision-makers. It is exciting to see that IPA is engaged in using a wide

range of research designs to generate rigorous and relevant evidence, and I am looking forward to seeing more research that takes this approach.

## **2. A lot of policy work is already happening**

In international development, policy advocacy is often most visible during big international fora that draw lots of attention and call on governments and international actors to make commitments: important, yet costly ways to ensuring accountability from participating representatives.

At IPA, policy work is happening in real-time all the time.

At IPA, policy work is happening in real-time all the time, but it mostly happens behind the scenes and at the country level. For instance, IPA has embedded staff sitting in government departments in Peru and Côte d'Ivoire, formal policy partnerships in Peru, Ghana, and Zambia in which IPA is working closely with the government and other partners to co-design and evaluate interventions and bring them to scale; it's on-the-ground footwork that could easily go unnoticed, and mostly, it has. But what this allows for is real-time influence in decisions that governments are making about how to best re-allocate teachers, or make changes to their curricula. By combining data use and policy engagement, IPA is finding a way to optimize the use of evidence in a way that is both relevant and timely to policy change. This is a relatively new area of work for IPA, but one that I am excited to build so that IPA can continue to improve people's lives.

## **3. Co-creating research**

Evidence-based policy-making is often presented as a one-directional process, in which research may be generated, synthesized, disseminated and ultimately, used by policy-makers. Reality suggests, however, that this linear progress is necessary but insufficient. I am pleased that IPA is investing more in co-creating research agendas and projects with academics and policy-makers (for example with [targeted instruction in Ghana](#)) so that we can ensure that studies are scientifically relevant, but also consider real-world relevance from the outset (see also these studies in [Zambia](#) and [Ghana](#)). This does not mean to say that every study will perfect this balance, but it does mean that we can more confidently suggest that the research we invest in, will actually make a difference in the world.

## **4. Diversifying research disciplines and partners**

Diversification brings in a broader set of expertise to bear on a certain problem and can inform a broader audience. I have found that at IPA there is an openness and eagerness to work with researchers from different disciplines as well as different countries. IPA has committed to building out more partnerships with local researchers and I'll be excited to share the scope and strategy for that commitment in the coming months.

IPA has also already begun diversifying into disciplines other than economics.

IPA has also already begun diversifying into disciplines other than economics. For example,

the Peace & Recovery Program has brought in many researchers from the political science field to better explain and test theories around crime, violence, and conflict. IPA's research initiative in intimate partner violence is now providing an exciting opportunity to leverage expertise from public health so that we might learn how traditional development interventions interact with issues related to violence in the home.

To be honest, working across disciplines and cultures can be difficult and these partnerships take time, but it's a win-win when it works. This is why I plan to support more diversification along these lines in the future, particularly as we continue to focus on issues that require a breadth of perspective and scientific tools to unpack, such as violence, migration, and mental health. I look forward to updating you on these efforts as we progress.

***5. Last, one thing that has struck me is the curiosity, humility, and good sense of humor of the people who work at IPA***

Some people might not associate economists with those traits, but I've found a great group of people who smash the stereotypes.

**To be clear, IPA still has a lot of work to do in each of these areas and some of these efforts are still in the early stages**—but I have been impressed to see that a lot of the foundational work of moving evidence to policy in an intentional and meaningful way has already begun. I'm excited to push these efforts forward in the coming years, especially as we refine our research agendas, build new partnerships, and deepen our policy engagements. I look forward to telling you more about where and how we are growing in this area, where the challenges are, and to getting your feedback along the way.

July 23, 2019