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10 Reasons We're Hopeful for 2021

A research project we couldn't have anticipated a year ago is looking at how to encourage community mask use in Bangladesh. Credit: Abu Raihan, Innovations for Poverty Action

There is no need to expand on why 2020 was a challenging year, and how scary the beginning of 2021 was. And there are certainly many difficult months (even years) ahead of us in managing this pandemic. Yet despite everything that 2020 (and now 2021) has thrown at us at IPA, we have seen how resilient our community of staff, partners, funders, and researchers has been, coming together to leverage our strengths to improve pandemic responses.

The impact bred in 2020, thanks to a combination of quick thinking and innovation, as well as

our long-term partnerships, fills us with hope. And **we—with over 20 years of IPA experience between us—have never been more proud to be a part of IPA**. We think sharing what is hopeful is even more important in the face of the kind of darkness we have witnessed in the past months.

In 2020, IPA pivoted our whole operations nearly overnight from face-to-face to interviews and policy work to high-quality remote phone surveys and remote engagement with policymakers, from webinars to slack channels. We quickly developed ways to answer policymakers' urgent questions by gathering, analyzing, and sharing timely data and evidence that informed over a dozen government responses to COVID-19. In the Philippines, for example, results from an IPA study are informing both the national return-to-school plan and the national emergency subsidy and cash transfer programs. In Côte d'Ivoire, the Ministry of Employment and Social Protection is using IPA results to increase access to COVID-19 preventive measures, support compliance with preventive measures, and improve the management of their recently launched social protection fund. We could go on (and our colleagues will in another post).

And yet there is still so much to do, and in 2021 IPA aims to help solve four of what we see as the most intractable policy problems for the COVID-19 era: a) mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and ensuring vaccine preparedness in the Global South, b) getting resources—in most cases cash—efficiently to those who need it most, c) promoting a safe return to school, or reaching kids where they are and accelerating learning Rewhen they return and d) ensuring that women and girls do not bear the brunt of this crisis. In tackling these challenge, the global, yet locally-grounded, influence of IPA's work seems ever more important.

Here are just some examples of what's to come from IPA and our partners in 2021…

1. **Globally, we are encouraged by the surge in support for evidence-informed policymaking**—whether in the new U.S. administration's pledge to restore trust in government through scientific integrity and evidence-based policymaking or in Europe, for example with France's Fonds d'Innovation pour le Développement. While the combination of increased extreme poverty and decreased aid budgets due to COVID-19 is extremely concerning (and we certainly would argue that rich countries have a moral imperative to keep their aid budgets at pre-COVID levels or higher), we are still hopeful that advancing evidence-informed programs will make what aid and government spending is available go further to improve more lives.

2. **On three continents, we're advancing improvements in refugees' livelihoods, child development, and economic and social integration into host communities.** Some of our research with Rohingya children in the world's largest refugee camp in Bangladesh alongside Sesame Workshop helped inform the design of two new Rohingya muppets to help educate kids there. You can see a video of some of that work in action from NBC News, or read about the new characters in the New York Times.

3. Our Bangladesh team is also working on an ambitious trial—the first of its kind that we

know of—teaming up epidemiologists and behavioral scientists[1] to **test how to encourage mask-wearing and to measure its impact on COVID-19 rates**.

4. Our Sierra Leone team, alongside researcher Anne Karing, is building on a successful study showing that bracelets were a cost-effective way to increase timely and complete childhood vaccination rates—considering how to use these results to inform not only a scale-up in Sierra Leone but also new vaccine rollouts elsewhere.

5. Our Latin America teams (including Emma Naslund-Hadley, Juan Manuel Hernandez-Agramonte, and Susan Parker) are **adapting and evaluating in other contexts an audio instruction program** proven effective prior to COVID-19 in reaching the most marginalized kids now out of school for an indefinite period.

6. Our Peru team and the Ministry of Education in Peru, in collaboration with the World Bank, updated a series of evidence-based videos demonstrating the importance of staying in school and broadcasted them nationwide as part of the country's remote learning strategy (expanding a scale-up that began in 2016). They are now collaborating with the ministry to **ensure parents get the kind of support they need to continue distance learning** while the pandemic continues and to help kids catch up when they return to the classroom.

7. Our Ghana team is working alongside the World Bank and UNICEF to support the Ministry of Education in Ghana to **scale up an effective differentiated instruction program to 10,000 schools, half the kids in Ghana**, who now more than ever need to catch up from so much time out of the classroom.

8. Our Mexico team and researcher Rodrigo Canales are **using rigorous evidence to improve policing**, and this evidence is not only informing the police department in Mexico City and beyond, but there are lessons we hope to bring to the current crises throughout the US and Latin America in 2021.

9. We are working across contexts—from Colombia to Togo to Bangladesh—supporting various government cash transfer programs with urgently needed data and evidence to ensure transfers reach the right people. As lockdowns return and the crisis goes on, solving this challenge is more important than ever.

These reasons for hope are why in 2021 we are doubling down on scaling up our strategy to equip policymakers and practitioners to use evidence to tangibly improve lives. Our ability to partner closely with decision-makers in the countries where we work comes from our commitment to have a local presence and experienced local staff and build relationships in the long-term. This local presence is now more important than ever, and we want to build on this foundation of our 500+ person strong locally grounded national staff in the 22 countries where we work to **develop more partnerships with national LMIC researchers that aim to lead to more sustained policy and practice improvements**. Finally, our research and our results are only as strong and credible as our data and our

methods. To ensure we constantly improve on our methods, measurement, and data collection practices, we are implementing a research agenda around these questions. For example, figuring out when is best to reach people for a survey, or how to measure difficult yet critical soft skills that can drive educational or business success.

If you are a long-time supporter, partner, or collaborator of IPA—you are the tenth reason we are hopeful. In 2020 we saw first-hand good people all over the world coming together to stand up to injustice, to solve poverty problems, and weather this prolonged crisis, and we have no doubt that despite everything, together we will continue to improve lives in 2021.

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1. Researchers: Jason Abaluck PhD, Ahmed Mushfiq Mobarak PhD, Steve Luby MD, Laura Kwong PhD, Ashley Rene Styczynski MD, Manu Prakash PhD and his lab, Dr. Meerjady Sabrina Flora, Director of IEDRC, Muhamad Maqsud Hossain PhD,Md. Alamgir Kabir, Mohammad Ashraful Haque, Arnab Bhattacharya PhD, Peter Winch PhD, Jade Benjamin-Chung PhD

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