EVIDENCE-BASED INNOVATIONS: CAN THEY GO TO SCALE?
A PERSPECTIVE FROM J-PAL AFRICA

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THE ABDUL LATIF JAMEEL POVERTY ACTION LAB (J-PAL) AND EVIDENCE INFORMED POLICYMAKING

The Poverty Action Lab was founded in 2003 at the Department of Economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) by professors Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, and Sendhil Mullainathan. The objective of the center was to support the use of randomized evaluations, to train others in rigorous scientific evaluation methods, and to encourage policy changes based on results of randomized evaluations. Today, J-PAL has grown into a network of almost 150 affiliated professors from nearly 50 universities around the world who conduct randomized evaluations to test and improve the effectiveness of programs and policies aimed at reducing poverty. Supporting our affiliated researchers are our Headquarters at MIT and 6 regional J-PAL offices based at universities with teams of staff focusing on delivering quality research, training and policy outreach.

J-PAL has grown rapidly since its launch and with it the number of randomised evaluations conducted on social program and policy questions. There are currently more than 800 ongoing or completed randomised evaluations generated by our network of affiliated researchers alone. The growth in this type of rigorous impact evaluation presents wonderful opportunities to inform policy, but this is coupled with the challenge of needing to improve models for promoting the take up of this evidence, so that ultimately our research findings positively impact the lives of the poor. Over the last five years in particular, J-PAL offices around the world have been responding to this challenge by focussing much attention on refining our policy outreach approaches so that more research is translated into action.

BARRIERS TO EVIDENCE TAKE UP AND J-PAL’S APPROACHES TO EVIDENCE-INFORMED POLICYMAKING

Whereas the first step in any evidence based policy outreach process is to translate often complex research outputs (e.g. journal articles, working papers) into easily accessible policy briefs and to share these with relevant policymakers, it is clear that summarising, distilling and sharing evidence is often insufficient to have it taken up. The reasons for this may include the following:

- Timing mismatch between research outputs and policy windows.
- Questions tested might not fit neatly into a specific existing policy/ programme thus requiring careful thought and planning to have them incorporated.
- Policymakers / bureaucrats may be unclear on the details of how to operationalize the research lessons in practice.
- The system may not have the capacity (human/ financial resources) to action a shift, be it small or large, or may suffer from inertia.
- Evidence may not be seen as central to decision-making and/or policymakers might not understand how to select high quality evidence over poor quality evidence.

In 2012 J-PAL secured funding to resource each of its regional offices with policy staff to promote evidence-informed policymaking in their region. This focused resource has allowed different models of policy outreach to develop in response to the policymaker context and research specificities in those regions. Examples of policy outreach strategies J-PAL uses to try to overcome some of the barriers to evidence take up identified above and promote its use in decision-making include the following:

1. **Support PIs in sharing preliminary evidence soon after evaluation is complete.**
   J-PAL staff assist affiliated researchers in packaging and sharing their study findings with relevant policymakers at opportune moments.

2. **Build institutional partnerships with governments to generate and integrate evidence.**
   J-PAL has examples in the USA, India, Brazil, Peru and South Africa of building partnerships with governments and academics in which they collaboratively identify and propose high-
impact solutions to policy relevant questions. The State and Local Innovation Initiative in the USA and Minedulab in Peru are two examples of our partnerships approach which focus on generating evidence around a particular theme.

3. **Advocate for and support scale-up of a lesson or successful program in another context (policy pilots, replications).** We have developed a framework we refer to as *Globally informed locally grounded policy advice* in which we combine results from rigorous evaluations, theory, descriptive data and qualitative research to assist us in assessing whether impacts found for interventions measured in one context are likely to replicate to another context. This approach is being used to leverage the value of evidence already generated and respond to immediate policymaker needs.

J-PAL Africa, based at the University of Cape Town, is J-PAL’s regional office for Sub-Saharan Africa. We work across the continent to share relevant global evidence across our sector areas from education to health to governance and use the policy outreach approaches outlined above that best match the context and evidence we are trying to share. In South Africa specifically, much of our work has been focused on youth unemployment with our approach in this context falling into J-PAL’s institutional partnerships category.

**J-PAL AFRICA AND THE COLLABORATIVE ANALYSIS OF LABOUR INTERVENTIONS EFFECTIVENESS (CALIE)**

In 2011, The Collaborative Analysis of Labour Interventions Effectiveness (CALIE) was launched as a partnership between the National Planning Commission in the South African Presidency and J-PAL Africa. The purpose of the project is to advance evidence-based and scalable policy solutions to South Africa’s youth unemployment crisis. To achieve this, the CALIE programme aims to (1) build a stronger link between research and policymaking; (2) design and execute high-quality randomised evaluations; and (3) build local research capacity.

The institutional partnership has developed over a period time and has included a number of key steps:

- A conference bringing together policymakers and local and international labour market researchers to identify critical policy relevant questions on youth labour market issues. The National Development Plan’s focus on Active Labour Market Policies formed much for the basis for identifying key questions to be tested.
- Seed funding provided by DFID to pilot ideas for possible full scale evaluations
- Funds provided by USAID to support a number of full scale evaluations
- Selection of an Advisory Committee of high level decision makers drawn from government, academia and the donor community to oversee the research, suggest new policy relevant questions for evaluation and advise on how to build this into policymaking processes as results emerge.

As studies which fall under the CALIE umbrella have launched and gone to field, so the J-PAL team has reported back to the Advisory Committee, keeping them up to date on study progress and sharing descriptive statistics and results as they become available.

Ultimately CALIE aims to be a space where quality randomized evaluations on employment challenges can be seeded and interrogated and the outcomes used to inform policymaking to address the unemployment crisis in South Africa.

One particular area of work which has interested researchers and implementing partners alike, has been the question of how youth signal their skills and productivity to the labour market. In South
Africa, with youth unemployment rates in the region of 37%, many firms have turned to social networks to fill vacancies. This is seen to be a disadvantage to less connected groups in society such as high ability applicants with weak social networks and females. The implication for the economy is that the quality of the matches between workseekers and firms may be sub-optimal. This could lead to lower productivity and reduced equilibrium employment.

One study that was seeded through the CALIE that focuses on this question is entitled Job Counselling, Productivity Signals and Employment (JPE) and provides an excellent example of how the “institutional partnership” approach helped seed a project set up to generate evidence that could feed directly into the policymaking process and therefore have a strong platform for scale.

THE VALUE OF REFERENCE LETTERS - EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE FROM SOUTH AFRICA

In response to the concern regarding the ability of young workseekers in South Africa to accurately signal their productivity, Martin Abel, Rulof Burger, Patrizio Piraino designed a series of rigorous randomised evaluations to explore if there were simple devices that could be used to improve signalling. One device of interest was an employer reference letter. In partnership with the Department of Labour (DoL), they set out to explore the value of such letters.

Building on formative focus group work which found very few young unemployed jobseekers included reference letters in their applications whilst employers expressed a wish for information on both cognitive (numeracy and literacy) and non-cognitive skills (e.g. reliability, work ethic) from credible sources, the researchers designed a reference letter template which includes this information and is easy for employers to complete. They then designed a set of experiments to explore the following questions:

- Do reference Letters have value, i.e. do they credibly signal workseeker ability/attributes?
- Do reference letters assist young workseekers in their job search in terms of increasing their chance of having an interview and their chance of finding a job?
- If young people are not using reference letters, why is this so?

Their study worked with a group of young jobseekers drawn from the Department of Labour’s ESSA database. It included unemployed youth (aged between 18-34) with less than university education but at least some work experience who had registered at one of four participating labour centres in Gauteng & Limpopo. Study participants were invited to come into these labour centres and be part of the study. They were tested for numeracy and literacy and were then assigned to different parts of the study in which some received regular labour centre services, some were encouraged to obtain reference letters on the template and return them to the study team to use in online job applications on their behalf and others were encouraged to obtain completed reference letter templates and use them in their own job search.

Through the different experimental arms, the researchers found a number of significant results: They found that including a reference letter increased employer interview requests and substantially improved a firm’s ability to select higher quality candidates. They also found that women were more likely to use reference letters than men. Encouraging women to use reference letters increased the likelihood of them finding a job after 3 months over women who were not encouraged, by 5.7 percentage points from 11.7 to 17.2 percent. When testing why so few people obtain reference letters, the researchers established that this is because they do not understand the potential value of these, rather than because they are too difficult to obtain.

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PATH TO SCALE

Findings of this work are compelling in terms of impact, cost effectiveness and simplicity for scale. The conditions for scale were well set from the outset as continued throughout the study process as outlined below.

_A solid partnership from the start._ The study idea emerged through the original CALIE workshop and was piloted with seed funding raised through the CALIE. The Department of Labour was involved throughout: - National level decision-makers approved the full scale proposal and granted permission for the work, the Department shared its workseekers’ database for development of the sample frame and labour centre officials worked with the J-PAL implementing team on the ground to deliver the programme.

_Thughtful and timely engagement from the principal investigators (PIs) and Department of Labour._ The academic team analysed the data and generated results soon after endline completion. The DoL was informed that the results were ready to be shared with them upon which they organised a meeting with approximately 30 participants from the National Department, the relevant provinces and participating labour centres. Discussion was lively and there was plenty of time allocated to unpacking the details of what the team learned did and did not work. A second meeting was arranged by the DoL to plan for a way forward. At this meeting, there was much discussion about how lessons from the research could be practically operationalized and what a pilot roll out plan might look like. _Research findings in the public domain:_ A first working paper was soon produced and made publically available online with a policy brief also compiled.

_A simple intervention easy to absorb into an existing system._ The reference letter template intervention tested the effects of encouraging young workseekers to get reference letters and use them in their job applications. The encouragement intervention was added to the standard job counselling workshop which is delivered at labour centres around the country. If the National DoL were to issue a directive to include this intervention as part of future workshops, this could be a simple add-on to the existing programme. Although simple, the details of the encouragement intervention do matter and it is important that these details are accurately shared with new labour centres that might take up the intervention.

_Minimal additional resources needed._ The costs of the scaling this intervention are minimal. It requires simple training on the intervention and the printing of reference letter templates. There is already a structure within DoL for sharing new information through the system and updating workshop content etc. Ideally, they will work through these existing structures to embed the lessons learned from the study.

_Plan for the future._ The Department of Labour has expressed an interest in piloting this intervention in 2 labour centres in each province as the first step in a roll out plan. The next steps involve planning through which structures this should be operationalized and ensuring the intervention details are packaged and trained with fidelity to the tested model. J-PAL Africa, The PIs and the DoL plan to work together on these next pieces.

_The role of J-PAL Africa._ As can be seen from the above, the conditions for the evidence emerging from this study to be taken up and scaled were well established from the outset. We believe that over and above the constructive relationship between the researchers and the DoL, the role of J-PAL Africa as catalyst, partnership builder and source of energy has been crucial to both stimulating the work, maintaining the relationships over time and promoting the final push for scale. J-PAL Africa has been deeply involved in this study from initiating and holding the CALIE process, raising and providing seed
funding for the piloting work, conducting the study in-field, and maintaining the relationship with the Department of Labour in their centres and at policymaker level over the life of the study. As results have emerged, our key role has been to initiate conversations with the Department of Labour and assist them in thinking through planning for scale. We will work with them to package the simple intervention so it can be trained to new labour centres and ensure the relevant details are well held within the Department. We have also offered to join a small number of trainings with the possibility of us visiting a few centres over the course of a year to see the intervention is being implemented with fidelity.

As we at J-PAL globally have invested much in trying to improve our policy outreach processes, we have learned one can approach these in structured ways that overcome many of the barriers which might limit evidence being taken up and proven innovations from scaling. One of our key lessons has been that it takes conscious effort and committed resource to promote these processes and increase the likelihood that important research findings are absorbed into policy. The effort should not stop after the study is completed, and having resource that can respond over a period of time well after study completion seems often to be a necessary condition for the research to translate into action.