

J-PAL

THE ABDUL LATEEF JAMEEL POVERTY ACTION LAB

A Lighthouse Case Study

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) is a global knowledge network consisting of researchers whose mission is to fight poverty with an evidence-based policy analysis process that utilizes randomized evaluations of poverty alleviation projects. These evaluations are then used to answer critical questions about the effectiveness of policies aimed at reducing poverty in countries around the world.

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Case in Brief

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) is a global knowledge network consisting of researchers whose mission is to fight poverty with an evidence-based policy analysis process that utilizes randomized evaluations of poverty alleviation projects. These evaluations are then used to answer critical questions about the effectiveness of policies aimed at reducing poverty in countries around the world. J-PAL (www.povertyactionlab.org) was established in 2003 in the Economics Department of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology by professors Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Sendhil Mullainathan with a mission to become a repository of the world's best poverty-alleviation research.

Today, J-PAL facilitates hundreds of evaluations of poverty alleviation efforts by affiliated professors and partners in order to bring scientific evidence to bear on what is and is not working in the mission to eradicate poverty worldwide. Based on its findings, J-PAL advocates for policy changes at international forums and with international organizations. The network operates globally and welcomes participation from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, foundations, international development organizations, donors and other research centers.

Introducing J-PAL

Throughout developing countries, many programs and policies aimed at reducing poverty are put in place without clear knowledge about their potential effectiveness, and without a systematic process for evaluating their results. Esther Duflo, MIT economics professor and co-founder of J-PAL, calls poverty alleviation efforts “more guesswork than science” and likens the current scenario, in which a great deal of aid is offered without a great deal of data regarding its effect, to medieval medicine. “The thing is, if we don’t know whether we are doing any good, we are not any better than the medieval doctors and their leeches. Sometimes the patient gets better, sometimes the patient dies. Is it the leeches? Is it something else? We don’t know.”¹

To help reduce this knowledge gap and to bring greater rigor and efficacy to poverty alleviation practices, Duflo and her partners set up J-PAL as a research institute within MIT in 2003. Its research objectives and methods attracted an international academic following and resonated with policymakers in bilateral donor agencies, NGOs and international organizations that were hungry for evidence to guide their decision-making and investment strategies. Today, J-PAL is a global knowledge network consisting of researchers and affiliate organizations around the world that share the goal of reducing

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global poverty by ensuring that aid and development policies are rigorously scrutinized using scientific evaluation methods.

When discussing J-PAL and the goals of the organization, Esther Duflo notes, “We are about how researchers and policy makers can come together to make sure that policy is informed by evidence.”² In this sense, Duflo equates the J-PAL methods and processes for social research with the practices of modern medical researchers. “You can put social innovation to the same rigorous, scientific tests,” says Duflo. “And in this way, you can take the guesswork out of policy-making by knowing what works, what doesn't work and why.”³

The methodological emphasis in J-PAL is on testing poverty alleviation theories, strategies and projects using randomized scientific evaluations. Like all impact evaluations, the main purpose of randomized evaluations is to determine whether a program has an impact, and more specifically, to quantify how large that impact is. Impact evaluations typically measure program effectiveness by comparing outcomes for recipients (individuals, communities, schools, etc.) against a control group. There are many methods of doing this, but randomized evaluations are generally considered the most rigorous and, all else being equal, produce the most accurate and unbiased results.

The evaluation process, however, is complex and J-PAL has spent the past decade perfecting its methodology and training a global network of researchers to perform its evaluations. Consider, as an example, a chlorine distribution program that has been implemented specifically to combat a high incidence of waterborne illness in a region. The project leaders wish to know whether the program is succeeding in its goal. This isn't the same thing as asking, “Does chlorine kill bacteria?” or “Is the consumption of chlorine harmful?” Those questions can be answered in a laboratory. For the program to measure its goal of reducing the incidence of illness, money must be allocated, chlorine tablets must be purchased, distribution mechanisms must be put in place, households must receive the tablets, households must use the tablets, households must not consume untreated water and household members must be surveyed at a later point to determine whether cases of water-borne disease have been reduced. In addition, a control group must be identified consisting of otherwise comparable households that do not use the program intervention, and related behavior and outcomes must also be captured in the data. A rigorous program evaluation by J-PAL would determine whether all of these requirements are being met, compare data and outcomes and determine whether the intended goal is actually being achieved.

Over time, the accumulation of evaluations such as these has become a substantial evidence base on efficacy of various policies and programs. The evidence base, in turn, provides an essential resource for governments, NGOs, foundations and companies that make significant investments of resources and capital in poverty alleviation projects and programs. Large international donors, for example, rely on J-PAL's scientific evaluations to gain insight into how aid can most effectively be disseminated and they use



J-PAL's policy recommendations on what works in reducing poverty to, as J-PAL describes it, "scale-up" the most effective programs. The governments of developing countries also benefit directly from J-PAL's research. Many have limited resources and research budgets, making it vital that policymakers are armed with evidence about which economic development strategies will be most successful and cost effective.⁴ By focusing its investigations on precise and specific questions, J-PAL is able to identify practical and effective programs to aid the poor.

The impact evaluations conducted by J-PAL are a part of a larger package of evaluations and exercises: ⁵	
Needs Assessment	The examination of what needs the program or policy is trying to fill and what steps need to be taken to achieve these objectives.
Program Theory Assessment	An assessment of the specific program is made.
Process Evaluation	Measurements are taken of whether the milestones and deliverables are adhering to the schedule. In many cases, systems to track processes are established.
Impact Evaluation	Evaluations used to measure whether programs or policies are effective in achieving its goals.
Cost-Benefit, Cost-Effectiveness and Cost-Comparison Analysis	This area of analysis evaluates if the benefits that have been achieved by the program are worth the costs. In addition, the benefits of the program are compared to similar programs that have like goals.
Goals, Outcomes and Measurement	Accurate measurement is an essential element of the evaluation. A standard system of data collection is required in order to facilitate analysis.

J-PAL's Multi-stakeholder Knowledge Network Tackles the Challenge of Understanding Aid Distribution

Since 2003, J-PAL has grown into a large network of affiliate professors and partners with the shared goal of reducing poverty by accumulating a deep evidence base that can help to shape policy initiatives and investment strategies. The benefits of involving many stakeholders can be seen through the diversity of research initiatives that the network leads. In addition to its headquarters located at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), J-PAL has independent regional offices worldwide including locations in



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Africa, Europe, Latin America, North America, South Asia and Southeast Asia. In each location a local university hosts J-PAL's affiliates and supports ongoing research. In addition, J-PAL works closely with many NGOs to evaluate and expand successful programs. These scale-ups have impacted the lives of more than sixty million people. For example, the Read India program, operated by the NGO Pratham, helped improve the performance of more than thirty million students whose reading skills were below their grade level. This program was sponsored by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, both of which are known for requiring evidence of success as a condition of further sponsorship.

J-PAL's network also includes partners who deploy J-PAL's methodology. These partners include: organizations that run the programs J-PAL affiliates evaluate; governments or international development organizations that then use policy lessons to scale up the most cost effective programs; donors that provide funding for J-PAL initiatives; and research centers that assist in the administration of randomized evaluations.⁶ J-PAL affiliates, to which J-PAL devotes considerable training resources, include organizations such as Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), Centre for Microfinance, Center for International Development's Micro-Development Initiative, Center of Evaluation for Global Action, Ideas 42 and the Small Enterprise Finance Center. Innovation for Poverty Action (IPA), links the world of academia to the practical application of policy change and works with J-PAL to design and then run program evaluations.

Case Study: Assessing Water Quality Projects in Kenya

Every year over one million children under the age of five who lack access to safe drinking water die from diarrheal diseases.⁷ Although the technology to provide safe water exists, isolated rural communities in developing countries are often too remote to be cost effectively served by modern water treatment plants. J-PAL affiliates Michael Kremer, Jessica Leino, Edward Miguel and Alix Zwane wanted to determine whether less costly spring water protection measures could adequately protect public health and reduce mortality rates. They identified communities in rural Kenya where natural springs are a major water source as an appropriate site for a series of randomized evaluations. Spring protection entails sealing off a spring's water source and encasing it in concrete so that water flows out from a pipe—directly into a water collector's bucket—rather than seeping from the ground where it is vulnerable to contamination.⁸

Over the course of two years, from 2005- 2007, J-PAL conducted surveys that tested the protected spring water and measured the health of surrounding households. The results of this survey proved that, with simple spring protection, treated springs had 66% less E. coli contamination than



did untreated springs.⁹ Further, J-PAL collected information on the points of re-contamination, water collection habits of locals and education on clean water practices. The information J-PAL collected from its randomized evaluations in Kenya led to the understanding that, while the protection of springs is critical to improve water quality, re-contamination caused by individual and household behavior is a factor in public health. The results indicated that a combination of easy water access and chlorine dispensers may be more effective than source improvements alone.

Leveraging Technology and Innovation

Within J-PAL's organization, technology plays a significant role in the collection and dissemination of information. Data is collected, documented, analyzed and shared within the network and then published on J-PAL's website, which includes a vast number of policy lessons, program evaluations and policy and academic publications. In addition, J-PAL leverages the power of social media through a YouTube channel, Facebook and Twitter to further broadcast information.

In many of the J-PAL programs, technology is a common factor in the ability to improve the lives of the poor. In the agricultural program, technological improvements have the ability to greatly improve agricultural practices. For example, randomized evaluations conducted in Africa focused on conducting research to understand how fertilizer programs can be made more effective. This study evaluated a program called the Savings and Fertilizer Initiative (SAFI), in which a field officer visited farmers following the harvest and offered them a limited time opportunity to buy a fertilizer voucher.¹⁰ By analyzing the fertilizer voucher program and the new agricultural practices, J-PAL was able to collect information on how these programs could be made more effective. J-PAL explores new and innovative ways in which technology can be used to improve the lives of those living in poverty, and uses randomized evaluations to determine the ways in which technology could be most effectively used.

Governance and Accountability

As a knowledge network, the quality of J-PAL's methodology and the independence of the evaluations form the core of the network's authority. Maintaining research integrity is, therefore, crucial to J-PAL's mission. Director of Training and Senior Research Manager of J-PAL Global, Marc Shotland, describes the process the organization undertakes to maintain the rigor



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of its research: “We carefully evaluate all aspects of the research program including sample size, sample selection and proper randomization. Our staff is trained to monitor the integrity of process design—for example, if a project is evaluating the impact of an education program, we don’t just go into a school to see if the program is implemented as planned, we will go in to the control schools to ensure that the program is not being implemented there.”¹¹

To avoid random or systemic measurement errors, J-PAL has improved the way that it trains field enumerators and improved the quality of test design. According to Shotland, “Ten years ago there probably were a lot more mistakes and noise in our data than there is now. Now we have several levels of checks; more systematic ways of training surveyors. We ask that training manuals be shared at least with the staff in general so we can verify that it was done correctly.”¹² In addition, J-PAL limits the use of self-reporting, especially in areas related to activities where subjects think that an accurate response might be embarrassing or cause them to feel judged by the researcher.

Fastidious partner selection is another critical aspect of how J-PAL maintains a high level of rigor and credibility in its knowledge network. According to Shotland, “While academics know that positive results are more likely to be published, the risk to their own reputations is enough of an incentive to report the truth. We only choose partners that are looking for proper research results—not just a rubber stamp of their pre-conceived notions.”¹³ In addition, he states that J-PAL “seeks out partners who value learning. We look for people who are fundamentally curious, but have some skepticism,” says Shotland. “If someone is certain of research results in advance, that is a big red flag.”¹⁴ Similarly, if a researcher suddenly becomes guarded or puts up communication barriers during a project, the project can be canceled mid-stream. Donors have supported J-PAL for eliminating partners who do not follow rules and J-PAL has been selective in only working with donors that value evidence-based research and that are prepared to accept the facts when programs they fund do not provide measurable or positive results. According to Shotland, many governments and NGOs fail to live up to this standard.¹⁵

J-PAL’s visibility, however, has resulted in criticism from those who believe that randomized evaluations are not the most useful research tools for identifying effective ways to reduce poverty. According to the journalist Nisha Susan, J-PAL’s work has been criticized as being naïve, for focusing on lesser rather than greater economic impact and for ignoring the big picture.¹⁶ In response to this, Duflo has said, “RCTs [randomized controlled trials] are a wonderful way to understand what drives people—by creating different conditions, and seeing how people behave under them.”¹⁷ While the results of randomized testing may not be applicable to every poor individual or community (the nature of the randomized testing suggests that results are unique to a specific area), the insights attained through testing provide an understanding of poverty that is absent from networks that simply provide monetary aid.



J-PAL has also been criticized for some of its research methods. For example, one study evaluated the effectiveness of using various incentives to drive behavior changes in poor communities. In a study of monthly immunization camps, researchers gave families a free kilo of lentils when they brought their children in for shots.¹⁸ Critics charged that the use of incentives was tantamount to “bribing the poor.”¹⁹ Using a reward at one camp and none at another, however, provided a basis for comparison and analysis. J-PAL maintains that the technique is necessary to understanding whether incentives can help boost compliance with public health promotion strategies. Furthermore, if the results are affirmative, then the public health benefits could outweigh concerns from some observers that such incentives are inappropriate.

The impact of J-PAL’s work can be measured in the success of its research and its effect on policy. Ensuring a positive effect on policy is a constant challenge, as many developing countries face issues of corruption within their organizational structures and governments. William Easterly, a professor and economist at New York University specializing in economic growth and foreign aid, explains the complexity of aid noting:

“It’s time to move the debate away from aid and towards development. ‘What promotes development?’ and not ‘What does aid do?’ There was a time to have the aid debate, but I think it’s getting past its sale date and it’s time to move on. The emphasis on aid has somewhat contaminated the debate on development in the following sense... I think it’s created this sort of technocratic illusion about how to do development. That the way you do development is you specify this set of technical solutions, these solutions are implemented and then development is solved. Poor people become rich. And that sounds good, and it’s very appealing and it would be very nice if it were true, but it leaves out a very important ingredient, which is people. It takes people to implement technical solutions. People are affected by technical solutions and [they] are left out. It also leaves out politics. There are people with power who have some interest at stake when technical solutions happen. They may not want those technical solutions to happen. They may want other technical solutions to happen, or no solutions to happen, that benefit them because they have the power and poor people don’t have the power.”²⁰

Easterly highlights why J-PAL’s work is so important to aiding those living in poverty. In order to accurately facilitate the reduction of poverty, aid networks must first understand the political nature of the country or community, and the potential outcomes of providing this aid.



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The Future

J-PAL's focus on research enables the organization to continuously grow and evolve as it works toward its goal to reduce poverty. As a global initiative, opportunities for transformation are evident in every program that the organization promotes. As of 2013, J-PAL boasted 83 affiliate professors, 423 ongoing or completed evaluations in 53 countries and 1512 people trained.²¹ J-PAL aims to continue its task of facilitating communication and partnerships between researchers and policymakers²² in order to implement positive change for those living in poverty. This outreach is accomplished through events such as the USI Africa Matchmaking Conference. In addition, providing forums that encourage collaboration between researchers and practitioners provides opportunities for J-PAL's policy recommendations to shape anti-poverty strategies and implementation.

Implications for Network Leaders

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab has grown rapidly since 2003, and has maintained its focus on scientific research to support positive change for the poor. The key lessons about how to design a world-class knowledge network are as follows:

Identify a unique gap in existing knowledge and concentrate resources on closing it. J-PAL identified the lack of evidence that was available to guide poverty alleviation efforts as a critical deficiency in international efforts to raise living standards around the world. By helping to close this gap with a unique methodology, J-PAL attracted interest from a network of similarly minded researchers. It also drew investment from governments, NGOs, foundations and international organizations eager to engage the network to evaluate their programs. To maximize their scale and impact, knowledge networks operating in any global problem-solving domain need to identify and tackle unresolved problems that will garner attention and resources from key players and networks in the ecosystem.

Nurture partnerships to expand reach, but maintain high partnership-selection standards. J-PAL wisely chooses to expand its international reach by building a global network of affiliates, rather than concentrating its resources at its MIT headquarters in Cambridge. However, J-PAL chooses partners carefully to ensure that all members of the network operate under the same high standards. Specifically, J-PAL works with academics who value their individual reputations over answering to the mission of an NGO or other group that may fund the research. It expects that the research will be undertaken with appropriate skepticism and proper hypothesis-driven



methodology. J-PAL follows strict standards about how research must be conducted (including pre-analysis reports that outline how data will be used and whether any subsets of data will be studied in order to avoid selection bias when reaching conclusions). While J-PAL works with some of its partner academics and organizations on multiple projects, it continually searches for new collaborators through informal discussions conducted by J-PAL leadership and participants as well as official “matchmaking” conferences that are held specifically to discover new projects.

Share knowledge and maintain visibility both via technology and in-person. J-PAL is successful, in part, because the organization effectively disseminates the information that has been collected from its randomized evaluations. J-PAL’s Policy Group is specifically tasked with raising the visibility of the organization and does so via a well-organized website, physical offices on five continents, regular conferences, *ad hoc* meetings and through its relationships with partner organizations such as Innovation for Poverty Action. J-PAL founders are on the lecture circuit and frequently publish in major journals. Esther Duflo, in particular, has a popular talk on TED.com regarding social experiments to fight poverty.

Concentrate on knowledge generation; drive impact through partnerships. It might be tempting for a knowledge network like J-PAL to apply its findings directly by dabbling in policy and program implementation. It’s important to recognize that the competencies required for effective research and knowledge dissemination are quite different from the competencies required for program implementation. J-PAL maximizes its impact by sharing best practices through its so-called “scale-ups,” which replicate effective programs around the world with the help of its partners in an organized and efficient manner. To date, programs that were found to be successful by J-PAL affiliates and then scaled up by NGOs, foundations, governments and international development organizations in different parts of the world have reached 164.6 million people.

Uphold impartiality with respect to research and partners. J-PAL is careful not to jump to foregone conclusions in its research and, importantly, projects that do not prove the original hypothesis are not considered to be “failures.” While this philosophy seems like sound research management, it is noticeably absent amongst many organizations that have a pre-set agenda. Further, making the original research available to the network makes even a “failed” research initiative valuable to other projects.

Build capacity to spread effective research practices. In addition to providing information about randomized evaluations on its website, J-PAL increases its visibility and the reach of its methodology by offering courses to those interested in conducting scientific research. Spreading awareness about the importance of scientific research is essential to J-PAL’s mission and its dedication to building capacity enlarges the pool of both people and organizations that possess the capabilities to help realize the ultimate goal of ensuring that poverty alleviation efforts are guided by evidence about what does and does not work.



Endnotes

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About Global Solution Networks

Global Solution Networks is a landmark study of the potential of global web-based and mobile networks for cooperation, problem solving and governance. This research project is a deliverable of the GSN program, offered through the Martin Prosperity Institute at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto.

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Ten Types of Global Solution Networks