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ABOUT THE GOVERNANCE INITIATIVE

Governments spend billions of dollars every year to provide citizens with basic services, but the impacts of this spending can be limited by ineffective policies and programs that may not reflect the needs and priorities of citizens.

Since 2010, J-PAL's Governance Initiative (GI) has helped answer critical questions on what works to strengthen governance, improve service delivery and accountability, and reduce poverty. Lessons from over 100 GI-funded evaluations have influenced the work of policy stakeholders in multilaterals, bilaterals, and national, state, and provincial government bodies around the world, from scaling candidate debate programs in Sierra Leone and Liberia to improving access to justice in Mexico.

The next phase of GI will catalyze innovative research, with a focus on the evolving governance challenges hindering development: political polarization, democratic backsliding, dis- and misinformation, and an [increasing proportion](#) of the world's extreme poor living in fragile states. This new research will leverage J-PAL's extensive policy partnerships, country infrastructure, and [global influence](#) formed over 20 years to contribute to evidence-informed policymaking for years to come.

GI will continue to fund rigorous, locally grounded, and policy relevant randomized evaluations in three priority areas:



Increasing citizen participation and accountability

GI studies how to ensure that citizens' voices are heard in elections and policymaking, and that policymakers are held accountable. This includes research on how the information environment and social networks shape citizens' political choices, and evaluations of initiatives ranging from civic education campaigns to participatory budgeting to community-driven development.



Fighting corruption

GI identifies effective programs to tackle corruption and mitigate its harmful impacts on citizens. This includes strategies to improve government transparency, accountability, and incentive structures.



Strengthening state capacity for service delivery

GI works closely with government partners to develop and evaluate approaches to improving delivery of critical social services. This includes streamlining processes, improving data collection and monitoring, optimizing tax policy and public spending, and recruiting, incentivizing, and monitoring public workers.

KEY FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

J-PAL is seeking forward-thinking partners to advance the governance research frontier and promote the use of rigorous evidence to support participatory political processes, government accountability, and effective service delivery for people in low- and middle-income countries. Additional funding will allow us to:

Fill evidence gaps by generating new randomized evaluations that rigorously test and improve the effectiveness of programs and policies in the priority areas of political participation, anti-corruption, and state capacity.

Translate lessons from research into policy by supporting the use of evidence and scaling up effective approaches, with the potential to improve the lives of millions of people around the world.

Expand the regional scope of this research by financing exploratory work for teams to develop the partnerships, networks, and research infrastructure required to foster evidence in settings where research funding has historically been limited.

Dedicate resources to support scholars from low- and middle-income countries to ensure that the evidence being generated is locally grounded and policy relevant.

GI THEORY OF CHANGE



1. Generating evidence

GI funds randomized evaluations at the frontier of governance research through competitive [requests for proposals](#) reviewed by a board of academic and policy experts. GI's research is anchored by J-PAL's global network of more than 375 of the world's top development economists and political scientists at universities around the world. Since its launch in 2010, GI has funded a portfolio of nearly 200 full randomized evaluations, pilot studies, and exploratory grants in 43 countries.

GI has set new standards for research in the field of governance through innovative methods and approaches, including social network analysis, use of low-cost administrative data, and application of machine learning techniques, demonstrated in nearly 70 working and published papers.

2. Informing and engaging decision-makers

Drawing on studies we've funded and the wider global evidence base of impact evaluations, GI staff and affiliated researchers translate research into actionable policy recommendations and lead outreach to government officials, civil society, donors, and multilateral organizations. In addition to one-on-one meetings and custom workshops, J-PAL convenes and presents at major international forums to help shift conventional thinking on best practices in governance. Policymakers have access to nearly 200 of our related [evaluation summaries](#) and [policy insights](#).

3. Catalyzing use of evidence

GI staff and affiliates go beyond sharing policy recommendations; we engage governments as active partners in the research process. GI leverages J-PAL's strong institutional partnerships with governments, civil society organizations, and other leading development organizations to incorporate evidence into decision-making. As of 2023, 53 percent of GI-funded research is composed of partnerships with governments to evaluate their own programs and inform their policy priorities.

In addition, through J-PAL's Evidence to Scale team and Innovations in Government Initiative, J-PAL provides direct support to policymakers to adapt, pilot, and scale evidence-informed innovations.

4. Fostering local research talent

GI seeks to empower local researchers based in low- and middle-income countries to ensure their expertise drives the governance research agenda and full evidence-to-policy process. LMIC-based researchers have access to GI financing for their research projects, dedicated [travel grants](#) to cover the costs of attending or presenting their work at major economics conferences, and mentorship through J-PAL's broader [regional scholars](#) programs. With additional support, GI could further support local researchers with access to new training, networking, and funding opportunities.

FROM RESEARCH TO POLICY

Scaling candidate debates in West Africa

In two GI-funded studies in [Sierra Leone](#) and [Liberia](#), researchers found that publicly-screened candidate debates increased voters' political knowledge and engagement, impacted their voting decisions, and increased candidates' investments in their constituencies. Based on these results, the research partners Search for Common Ground (SFCG) and Internews worked to institutionalize the debate process in Sierra Leone and Liberia, respectively. SFCG scaled parliamentary debates in Sierra Leone from 14 to 72 constituencies, and supported the implementation of a high-profile, televised [debate](#) among presidential candidates in 2018. In Liberia, Internews organized a number of by-election debates in 2018-19, hosted debates in all 15 counties for the special senatorial election of 2020, and supported the development of a "promises tracker" to evaluate incumbent performance based on candidates' responses to debate questions. Internews plans to continue these projects for the 2023 legislative and presidential elections.

Improving access to justice and limiting corruption in Mexico

A GI-funded study in Mexico City found that providing personalized information to labor court plaintiffs on predicted case outcomes, as well as free court-provided mediators, was effective in increasing settlement rates—important to preventing cases from remaining in the system for years without resolution. The findings led to a new federal labor law that requires free provision of information for all plaintiffs on their rights, as well as mandating free mediation before a lawsuit can be filed. GI is now funding continued research focusing on reducing corruption in court notification procedures. The procedures to be tested will be scalable to the national level.

Optimizing tax policy in the Democratic Republic of Congo

In partnership with the provincial government of Kasai Central, researchers [evaluated](#) the impact of lowering taxes and implementing stronger tax enforcement on revenue collection. Reducing property tax rates from current levels increased government revenue due to higher tax compliance. However, the property tax rate that maximized government revenue increased with enforcement. Researchers are now continuing their collaboration with the government to explore the impact of progressive property taxation on total revenue, household compliance, and perceptions of fairness and tax morale. Together, this long-term partnership will inform the design at scale of a tax schedule that balances revenue and fairness.



Two members of parliament participating in a policy debate with a moderator in Sierra Leone. Photo credit: Allyson Barnett J-PAL/IPA

GI LEADERSHIP

Frederico Finan (Professor of Economics and Business Administration at University of California, Berkeley) and Rohini Pande (Henry J. Heinz II Professor of Economics and Director of the Economic Growth Center at Yale) provide academic leadership to ensure that GI remains the world's leading research fund producing rigorous experimental evidence on cost-effective solutions to governance challenges.

CURRENT AND PRIOR SUPPORTERS INCLUDE



ABOUT J-PAL

The [Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab](#) (J-PAL) is a global research center working to reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is informed by scientific evidence. Anchored by a network of more than 870 professors at universities around the world, J-PAL conducts randomized evaluations to answer critical questions in the fight against poverty. We build partnerships with governments, NGOs, donors, and others to share this knowledge, catalyze adoption of evidence at scale, and advance evidence-informed decision-making. J-PAL was launched at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2003 and has regional centers in Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, North America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

For more information about the Governance Initiative and partnership opportunities, reach out to Initiative Manager Alex Chen at gi@povertyactionlab.org.