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Conditional cash transfers and health: unpacking the causal chain

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Randomized impact evaluations not only grow the body of research but can also influence policy by informing key decision makers in governments, international development organizations, NGOs and foundations about what has been found to work, or not work in poverty alleviation programs. Policy based on such scientific evidence can result in programs that have bigger impacts and are more cost effective, thereby making a bigger dent in poverty and boosting efforts to attract more development funds. While the use and acceptance of randomized evaluations has increased in recent years, the translation of the results from such studies into policy impact is neither automatic nor easy due to a number of reasons that include differing incentives of researchers and policymakers, differing writing styles for academic vs. policy publications, and the difficulty in comparing results from the large and growing body of evaluations from different parts of the world.

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) with centers at MIT (USA), Paris School of Economics (France), PUC (Chile), University of Cape Town (South Africa) and IFMR (India), has three core missions – Conducting Rigorous Impact Evaluations (our 52 affiliated professors have more than 250 ongoing or completed randomized evaluations in 42 countries), Building Capacity (by training others on how to conduct randomized evaluations) and Impacting Policy. J-PAL's policy group works through a number of channels to ensure that results of impact evaluations are utilized for policy making. In this presentation, we will begin by detailing what are policy outcomes that we try and influence: (a) changing the way organizations (both implementers and funders) make decisions to ensure that they use scientific evidence rather than just instincts to evaluate the performance of policies; (b) using evaluations to help design new programs; (c) testing variations in existing programs; (d) scaling-up programs found to be successful; and (d) influencing overall policy debate.

We will then share the different methodologies that we use to try and influence these outcomes including matchmaking conferences that result in innovative programs being evaluated, evidence workshops that showcase successful collaborations from the field between researchers and policy makers, publications that frame research results in terms of their policy relevance, and how costeffectiveness analyses can be a powerful tool to help policy makers compare results from multiple evaluations. We will discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of these approaches, and provide examples of each one from our experience to discuss which one is best suited in which context and how best to structure them to maximize their impact on policy.

In particular, we will spend time discussing JPAL's methodology for conducting cost effectiveness analysis, which compares programs and policies tested in different contexts but that aim to

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achieve the same goal (e.g. comparing the cost effectiveness of deworming vs. conditional cash transfers in raising school attendance). Such analysis often presents surprising results that challenge previously held conventions and can provide policy makers a vital input to enable them to make more efficient allocation of scarce resources. Despite its obvious advantages, cost-effectiveness analyses are rarely undertaken due to a number of reasons including the difficulty in gathering good cost and impact data, and the challenge of how to make comparable the costs and impact information from programs that were run in different countries in different years. We will discuss some of the methods to overcome these challenges, and conclude with a discussion of what can researchers do at the evaluation stage itself to make such future comparisons easier so that policymakers are more likely to use the results from impact evaluations.



Iqbal Dhanwar is the global head of Policy for Jameel Poverty Action Lab and a member of its Executive Committee. He works with policy makers in governments, development organizations, foundations and NGOs to disseminate the policy implications of JPAL's research, identify new field evaluations and implement the scale-up of successful programs in developing countries. He works with researchers to create cost-effectiveness analyses that compare the policy outcomes and costs of development programs. He is currently conducting an impact evaluation in the health sector in India.



Earlier he was a member of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) where he worked in policy formulation as a Deputy Secretary in a state government, and led the implementation of development programs in the field as a Sub Collector. Iqbal has a BA in Economics from University of Delhi, an MA in Economics from Delhi School of Economics and a Masters in Public Affairs from Princeton University. He is based at MIT, Cambridge, USA.

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