What Works in Microfinance: Evidence to Promote Financial Inclusion in Egypt

Event Agenda & Concept Note

Date: August 24, 2026
Location: Moataz Al-Alfi Hall, The American University in Cairo, New Cairo Campus

Introduction

Microcredit is one of the most widely used tools for economic empowerment, built on a simple premise: give someone access to capital, and they'll grow their business, earn more, and improve their life. It's a premise that has driven the expansion of microcredit to well over 100 million borrowers worldwide. Yet rigorous evidence tells a more complicated story. Across a wide body of randomized evaluations, borrowers under the classic microcredit model weren't consistently earning more, growing their businesses, or improving their households' lives. For the typical borrower, access to a loan alone wasn't enough to transform outcomes.

The more encouraging finding is that *how* microcredit is designed matters as much as whether it's offered at all. Across this same body of evidence, two design features consistently stand out for improving impact: better targeting of borrowers (going beyond standard business and demographic data to identify who is most likely to benefit from capital), and more flexible products that are built around the real needs and constraints borrowers face, rather than a single fixed loan structure applied to everyone. Where lenders have tested these design changes, the results have consistently outperformed the traditional model.

This event is a product of the long-standing partnership between the Sawiris Foundation for Social Development (SFSD) and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab Middle East and North Africa (J-PAL MENA) in pursuit of exactly this question: not whether to lend, but how to design microfinance products that work. Over that time, SFSD and J-PAL MENA have worked together to test these design innovations directly in the Egyptian context, building a rigorous evidence base to guide the design and delivery of microfinance. This event brings that body of work together to share what our long-standing partnership has taught us, and what it means for the next phase of microfinance design in Egypt.

Event Agenda

TIME	SESSION
9:00-9:30	**Registration and coffee**
9:30 - 9:45	**Welcome remarks** • **Ahmed Elsayed,** Executive Director, Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab Middle East and North Africa • **Laila Hosni,** Executive Director, Sawiris Foundation for Social Development
9:45 - 10:30	**Session 1: Evidence on product design and reaching borrowers that traditional products leave out** *Adam Osman, Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign and Co-Scientific Director of J-PAL MENA at AUC* A large body of evidence has shifted the central question in microcredit from whether access to credit works to why its effects vary so widely across borrowers. Global evidence from randomized evaluations points to a consistent pattern: average impacts on business growth and household welfare are typically modest, while a subset of borrowers experience substantial gains. This session presents evidence from Egypt on the impact of providing different types of microfinance products, including those with varied interest rates, varied levels of repayment flexibility, and micro-equity arrangements, on business development and borrower behavior."
10:30 - 10:50	**Partner Spotlight: Redesigning products**
10:50 - 11:00	**Q & A session**
11:00 - 11:20	**Coffee break**
11:20 - 12:15	**Session 2: Evidence on targeting high-potential borrowers** *Adam Osman, Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign and Co-Scientific Director of J-PAL MENA at AUC*

	This session draws on studies from Egypt to examine which borrowers benefit most from capital, and what this heterogeneity implies for how lenders identify high-potential clients and structure loan-officer incentives.
12:15 - 12:35	**Partner Spotlight: Identifying high-potential borrowers**
12:35 - 12:45	**Q & A session**
12:45 - 1:45	**Moderated Q&A: from Evidence to Action** ● We invite participants to share the challenges they're facing in reaching and serving borrowers, and the innovations they see emerging in the field that show promise. ● The aim is to pressure-test the evidence against practitioner realities, surface field-level innovations and implementation barriers, and begin assembling the seeds of a shared adoption roadmap. ● Wrap-up (5 min): Moderator synthesizes key themes, notes areas of convergence and divergence, and frames the closing session.
1:45 - 1:55	**Closing Remarks**
1:55 - 2:15	**Light lunch and networking**