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What We've Got Here is a Failure to Communicate: Three Ways to Bridge the Academic/Practitioner Gap

One prerequisite for evidence-based policymaking is the existence of a collaborative relationship between the worlds of research, policy and practice. But how do we facilitate productive three-way communication between these actors?

At the Financial Inclusion Program at Innovations for Poverty Action (a NextBillion content partner), we've organized a number of large conferences with the intention of catalyzing conversations. But we've found that vague prejudices can taint what could be opportunities to listen and learn. Practitioners sometimes suspect researchers of working on projects out of academic interest alone, with no interest in the human side of the research, or of focusing too much on methodology and lacking an understanding of context or practical application. Researchers sometimes think that practitioners and policymakers value only politics, intuition or emotion when making decisions, instead of facts and evidence, or that they put their own interests above those of their clients. And each sector – and even organization – has its own vocabulary and jargon that is second nature to individuals within the sector, but easily misinterpreted by those outside. Every failure to communicate is a missed opportunity: researchers are unable to hear the questions that practitioners need answered or learn about the constraints in which they operate; practitioners can't digest the evidence that researchers have generated, or think about how it might apply to their own work.

In an effort to create a space for more effective, cooperative communication, this spring and summer we ran a series of policy workshops for local financial service providers, regulators and researchers in Bogota, Manila and Mumbai. We wanted to provide an intimate forum for people from different sectors to easily question each other, critique one another's approaches, debate contentious points, surface unanswered policy questions, and sift through the implications of rigorous evidence for their country and institution. While longer-term "success" is difficult to define and measure for policy events like these, we were encouraged by the level of participant engagement and the richness of the discussions at each event. Here are three design elements that we (and event participants) thought worked well:

- **Limited and curated content.** Each workshop was just one day and consisted of very few, carefully curated priority topics for financial service providers and regulators in the

particular country. We kept the number of participants small, to ensure that only organizations and individuals who were interested in those topics would be in the room (though we still made sure that multiple sectors and perspectives were represented). We think that made for a more interested, less fatigued and more comfortable audience.

- **Emphasis on discussion.** We split the day as evenly as possible between presentations and open discussion, to give everyone ample opportunity to ask questions, voice concerns and share experiences in a less structured format. To facilitate a discussion-focused atmosphere, at two of the three workshops presenters did not use PowerPoint slides; instead, during their presentations they remained seated, boardroom-style, with the rest of the participants. We were impressed by the amount of back-and-forth discussion, which was sometimes contentious but nearly always productive.
- **No academic presentations.** We asked all the researchers to focus on the practical and policy implications of their work, rather than describing the details of particular studies, in an effort to cut back on academic language. We also invited practitioners who had participated in research studies in the past to share how the results affected their organizations' work. Several attendees told us that was a valuable addition to our panel discussions.

The positive feedback we received from those in the room suggests that we're on the right track, but we want to keep getting better! If you have ideas for how we can continue to improve learning and communication, we invite you to share them in the comments. We'll also continue to move good ideas forward through our competitive research fund, which is dedicated to helping academics, practitioners and policymakers design and test new financial inclusion innovations together.

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