

Authors

Annie Duflo
Executive Director, IPA and Ex Officio Member, Board of Directors

COVID-19: How IPA is Responding, Adapting—and Preparing

As COVID-19 continues to spread rapidly across the globe, we at IPA—like all of you—have been closely monitoring this rapidly evolving situation and adapting our lives and our work as a result. We have been consulting widely to determine the best course of action to keep our staff and the communities they interact with as safe as possible, and to do this we have benefitted from the best practice advice of other international organizations and health and safety experts.

In addition to the first and most urgent priority of protecting health and safety, we feel it is our responsibility to adapt during this time so that we can contribute meaningful data, evidence, and analysis to the response to this crisis. Our research and programs teams are already exploring ways that we can adapt our work and leverage our institutional comparative advantage and staff in 22 country offices to support the response effort.

In addition to the first and most urgent priority of protecting health and safety, we feel it is our responsibility to adapt during this time so that we can contribute meaningful data, evidence, and analysis to the response to this crisis.

Here is what we have done thus far to respond, mitigate impacts, and prepare for what's to come.

Prioritizing health and safety

The health and safety of our staff and the communities in which they work is our first order of priority. We have therefore taken the necessary measures to protect staff, including suspending travel for all IPA staff globally, canceling events, and moving to work from home in affected countries. The state of our field operations is changing quickly as we move from in-person data collection to phone-based surveys where possible and postpone future work as needed. We are also consulting with partners, researchers, and funders to determine the best course of action for each project in each country to develop adaptation plans and strategies.

We are also consulting with partners, researchers, and funders to determine the best course of action for each project in each country to develop adaptation plans and strategies.

Note: Plans are changing quickly; we will continue to update and consult with relevant parties as the situation evolves.

Adapting our work in the face of a pandemic

IPA's comparative advantage is research management and policy outreach. Since timely and accurate data and evidence are needed in times of crisis, we feel it is our responsibility to contribute in any way we are uniquely positioned to—that is, by leveraging our on-the-ground presence in 22 countries, our data collection expertise, and our relationships with governments.

In the face of other crises where timely data has been needed, such as during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, IPA has worked to respond and pivot to data needs on the ground. Now, with COVID-19, we are reaching out to our research and funding partners to identify ways that together we can adapt and respond to the situation.

For example, on March 9 our Peace & Recovery team began accepting time-sensitive off-cycle proposals that answer questions about how communities may best respond to the shock and crisis of COVID-19. Due to the limited funding available, this funding will likely not fund entire randomized evaluations but is meant to support research projects with additions such as:

- Adding a module to an existing phone survey to track COVID-19 response or behavioral change (i.e. the percentage of the population exercising social distancing)
- Adding a treatment arm that may support communities' resilience in response to COVID-19
- Anonymizing, curating, and sharing already-collected data quickly so that it can be used for decision-making by the humanitarian community
- "Downstream phone surveys" that follow up on a sample that participated in an already-completed randomized evaluation to identify whether the intervention studied has an impact on the communities' response to COVID-19, or that include an additional module related to COVID-19

Seeking to support partners during this crisis

We are currently actively exploring ways to support partners with research, information, and data needs during this crisis. Here are some examples of ideas we are exploring:

- **Creating and sharing evidence on how to achieve behavioral change to slow the spread of COVID-19:** First, we are sharing existing evidence with decision-makers on how to achieve behavioral change around handwashing and other hygiene-related behavior, that stems from our large-scale studies and technology innovations in

Bangladesh, Kenya, Peru, and elsewhere. Second, if time allows, IPA will begin to develop new rapid-fire evaluations on how to promote behavioral change around some of the behaviors required to slow down viral dissemination and avoid further risk or harm—including promoting social distancing, discouraging hoarding, etc. These rapid-fire RCTs may leverage some of the sampling frames and relationships with respondents that IPA developed before the pandemic.

- **Offering our expertise in data collection and analysis to support the response:** Our country offices are reaching out to our in-country partners and governments to offer our support for the response—including staff time, remote survey capacity, and leveraging existing sample frames for remote data collection.
- **Building on existing research projects:** As this will not be the last shock to hit the communities we work with, we are modifying research projects to test whether some of the interventions we are currently evaluating may impact communities' resiliency to epidemics. This could guide policy moving forward in order to strengthen community resilience.

If you are a researcher, implementer, or funder interested in these or other related topics, please reach out to us to discuss. Our Peace & Recovery team is leading our coordination and can be reached at peace@poverty-action.org.

IPA is also exploring partnerships to launch a competitive fund for COVID-19 response research projects such as those described above. Please let us know if that is also something that interests you at pd@poverty-action.org.

We are grateful to our funders who have reached out to offer flexibility and are open to adapting to the circumstances. We encourage all funders and partners to continue to support each other with this kind of flexibility in the face of unknowns. As IPA weathers this uncertainty around the world, we ask that you consider continuing or renewing your support of our work.

As the situation is changing rapidly, we will continue to update this post in the coming days and weeks to reflect our latest actions and efforts to respond, adapt to the situation, and above all, to keep our staff and communities safe.

Thank you for your partnership, and stay well.

March 18, 2020