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Odette Gonzalez Carrillo: Evidence is the Foundation of Effective Policy

*To mark its 20th anniversary, Innovations for Poverty Action created *People of IPA*, a series of profiles celebrating IPA's diverse staff, highlighting their contributions, and discussing how and why they seek to improve the lives of those living in poverty. Odette Gonzalez Carrillo is IPA's country director for Mexico.*

Scientific evidence separates guessing from knowing. It's the difference between an idea that merely sounds good and one that's been proven through research. In international development, evidence can save time, money, and even lives.

For Odette - and IPA - "evidence is the foundation of effective policy."

"For a long time," she continues, "I have been trying to push the use of evidence to inform decisions in the government and other places."

Her background spans not just government, but also private consulting and NGOs. While studying for her master's degree at Harvard University's Kennedy School, Odette learned about IPA and its sister organization, J-PAL, and saw how they work with professors and researchers.

In IPA, she saw an appreciation for evidence that matched her own. "It's something that I had been seeking for - I don't know - ten years," she says. "And I finally found this organization that does exactly what I was looking for."

PEOPLE OF IPA



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She joined IPA three years ago in her home country of Mexico, with a project on security and policing as her main responsibility. “IPA allowed me to expand the office and grow into the role,” she says. “And now I’m country director, and I’m managing around 15 projects in my office,” focusing on areas ranging from early childhood development and climate change to financial inclusion and crime prevention.

Reflecting on what she’s learned so far, she says, “I think the most important thing is how to really implement programs that are evidence based,” she says, “and also how these programs that are evidence-based can scale up, and then be implemented in other places.”

Staff at IPA aren’t reluctant to express how much they value their colleagues. For Odette, one of the best things about her team is their commitment. “They’re very passionate people,” she says. “You don’t have to be going after them to make them work. They just love their job. It’s very easy to work with people like that.”

In fact, their enthusiasm has led Odette to consider expanding the team’s responsibilities. “Sometimes I feel like they push me to grow the office, to find more projects we can execute. New projects, new impact.” But their extraordinary drive is just one thing she likes about her colleagues. She also notes that they’re highly qualified and nice to work with.

For Odette, the work she does at IPA connects with her desire to make her country a better place. “

Growing up in Mexico, with all the insecurity and all the development problems we have, I’ve been trying all my life to do something to improve the country,” she says. “That’s why I

studied political science and public policy. And for a long time, I thought that the best way was to work within the government, and I tried to make change from within. But from my experience, I realized that sometimes it's easier to make change from the outside.”

That slight distance from the system gives Odette and her colleagues space to deeply consider the problems they aim to solve, benefitting both them and their partners.

“We work together with the government,” she says, “but we have the capacity to sit down and think, and not be super reactive. So we advise decision-makers, who sometimes are very busy and have a lot of things to do, and we help them to do all this back up, like planning and everything. And I think we are doing great work, doing that.”

“Working with the government to do better policies, especially for security - that, I think, is crucial for our country.”

IPA spoke with Odette in August 2022