Putting evidence to work around the world for greater impact

ipa Innovations for Poverty Action
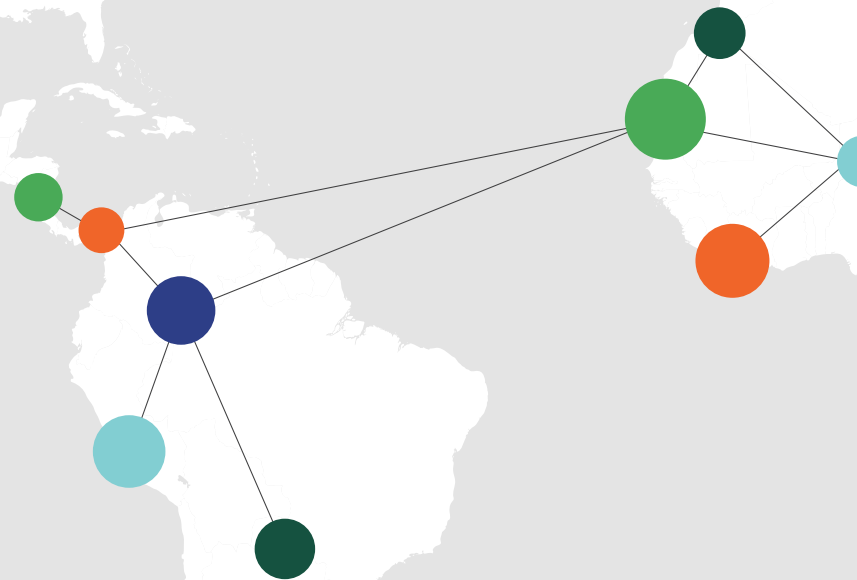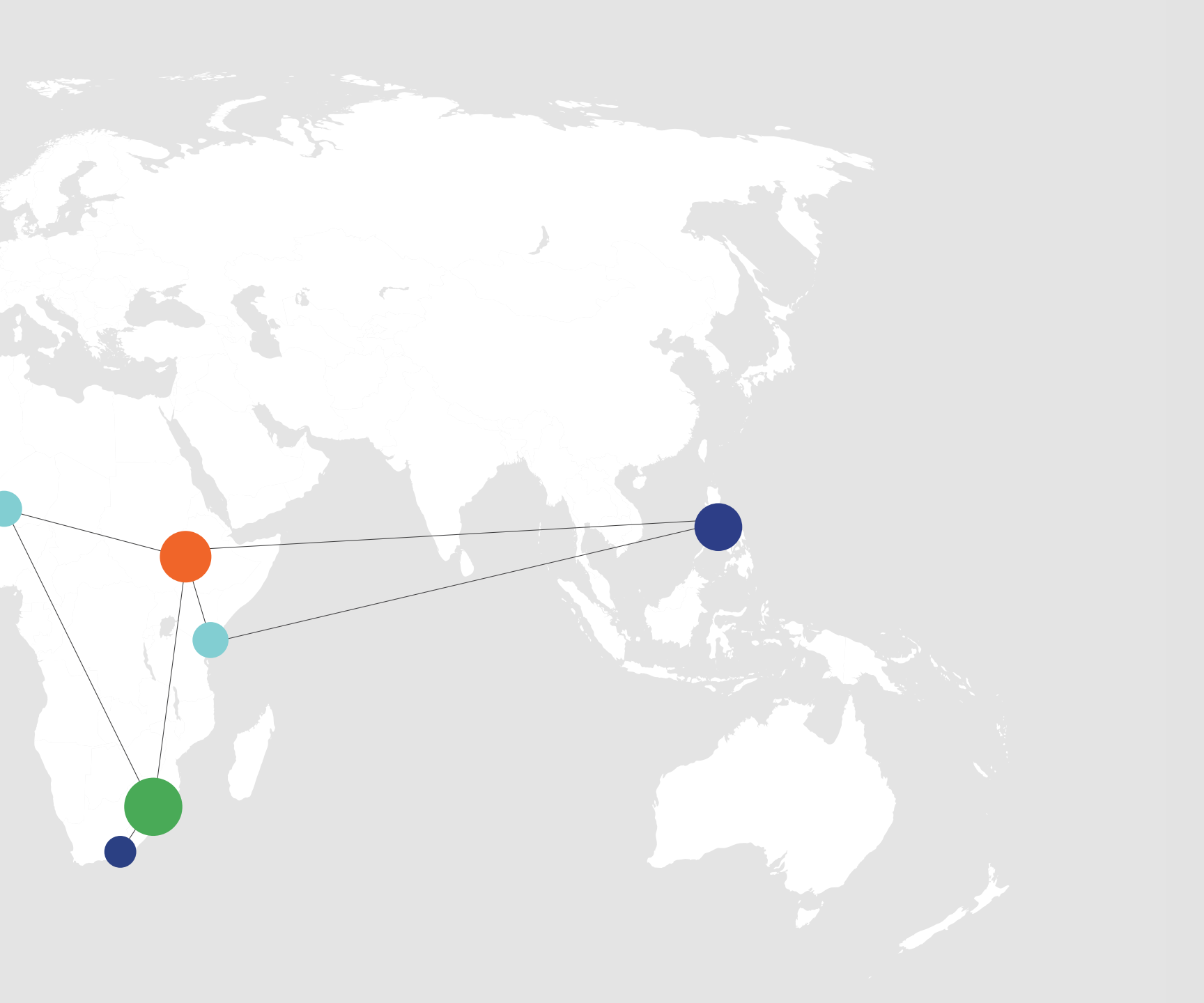
Though the use of evidence to inform policy and programs has grown over the past twenty years, only a small amount of evidence that exists is actually used. In order to have a transformative impact and significantly improve the lives of people living in poverty we must invest now.

Over the past twenty years Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) has learned a significant amount about generating and sharing data and evidence to alleviate poverty. **Now, IPA is launching a $15 million campaign to put evidence to work around the world for greater impact.**

Twenty years ago, international development professionals had very little rigorous evidence to help answer the tough questions about what works to solve poverty's most enduring and urgent problems. Would it help families to just give them cash—or was it better to give them job training? Was it better to give children scholarships to get them in school, or could we boost school attendance by giving students a regular deworming pill?

In a time when these questions were unanswered, guesses and good intentions were the best that decision-makers could offer. **Today, with strong evidence in our hands, we can do so much better.**

For over twenty years, IPA has rigorously evaluated interventions to understand what works (and what doesn't)

A survey conducted during IPA's impact evaluation of land allocation programs in Myanmar. © 2020 IPA

to improve the lives of the millions of people living in poverty around the world, using the results to support decision-makers in creating and implementing the most effective, evidence-informed policies.

Thanks to this work, and the work of other committed development evaluators, the body of evidence in international development has grown tremendously, to more than 12,000 impact evaluations.[1]

Evidence proving the effectiveness of poverty-alleviation approaches has been used to shape specific programs, and helped sustain them through changing economic times and political cycles. It has informed the allocation of millions of philanthropic dollars, toward programs such as school-based deworming and chlorine dispensers for safe water, both evaluated by IPA.

---

1. As recorded on 3ie's Development Evidence Portal (a repository of rigorous evidence about what works in international development).

ipa Innovations for Poverty Action

1

It has also been used to debunk conventional wisdom: for years, experts questioned the impact of unconditional cash transfers—until their effectiveness was proven through rigorous evaluation by IPA. These programs have proven so effective, they are now widely accepted and even used as a benchmark for measuring the effectiveness of newer interventions.

Despite this progress, the movement for evidence-informed development stands at a crossroads. Using evidence to shape programs and policies is still the exception rather than the norm. The number of evidence-informed interventions on a global scale is still limited compared to the body of available evidence. **Connecting evidence to decision-making is where our sector now needs greater investment** if we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 while saving and improving millions of lives.

Since the launch of IPA's strategic ambition in 2018, we have focused on strengthening the connection between the evidence we generate, decision-making and implementation. This work ranges from supporting the scale-up of specific programs to creating evidence labs embedded within governments. **Today, turning evidence into action makes up almost a third of our work, with the rest focused on evidence generation.** Yet we are only scratching the surface of the transformational potential of increasing the use of evidence and having a significant impact.

For evidence to have a wide-reaching and sustainable impact on the lives of people living in poverty, we need to dramatically expand our scope and increase our focus in this space. In the polycrisis era we are experiencing, achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals is ever more challenging by 2030. Now more than ever we must invest in evidence-informed policies and programs.

NOW IS THE TIME TO INVEST

1. In the last five years, we have learned much about what is needed to translate evidence into action, we have **developed strong capabilities** to do this work, and we are well placed to take on this multi-pronged challenge.

2. The increased demand for IPA's approach of connecting evidence to decision-making has created a wide range of **timely, high-leverage opportunities** for partnerships and growth.

3. **The need is more urgent than ever.** The pandemic pushed hundreds of millions of people back into poverty and reversed positive trends, even as governments and other major funders have cut support for development.

ipa Innovations for Poverty Action

We have an opportunity and a duty to translate what we have learned into real impacts for the almost 700 million people who live in extreme poverty worldwide.[2]

In 2022, IPA's achievements, strengths, and promise were recognized by MacKenzie Scott and other institutional donors with significant unrestricted gifts. We are investing $5 million of these gifts in this campaign and are looking to **raise an additional $10 million to dramatically accelerate and strengthen IPA's impact while improving and saving lives.**

Here is how we will do that. →

2. Living on less than US$2.15/day. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview.

ipa Innovations for Poverty Action
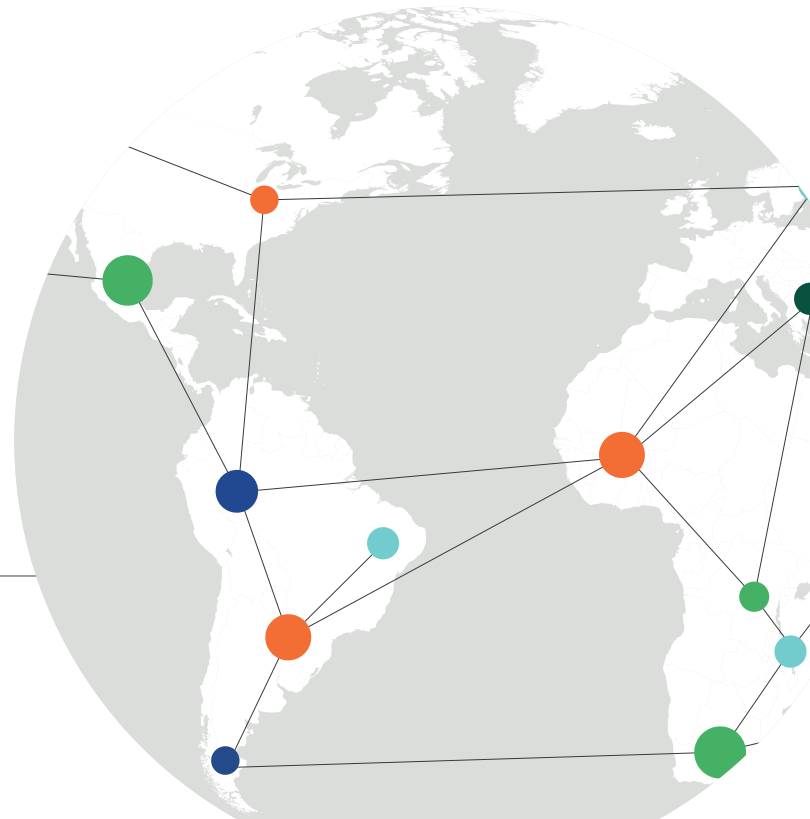
1 Increase immediate evidence use and scale-up of promising programs [$7M]

Scaling evidence-informed solutions

IPA will build on and expand the catalytic role it has been playing in supporting the scale-up of strong evidence-based interventions. These are powerful cases in which impactful policies and programs are expanded and sustained over space and time to save lives, reduce poverty, and improve well-being for millions of people. IPA's role is to support implementers to make data- and evidence-driven scaling decisions, build policy and partnership pathways to apply those decisions in practice, and institutionalize learning cycles into programs as they scale. Whether seizing an opportunity to inform Kenya's national teacher education policy with applicable evidence, scaling the graduation approach to reduce extreme poverty in multiple countries, or expanding the reach of evidence-based teacher recruitment practices in Rwanda, these activities leverage timely and impactful opportunities to turn evidence into large scale action.

To reach an additional 50 million people with interventions proven to improve lives, IPA will invest in partnerships to create and consolidate new scaling opportunities. By refining our scale-up offerings and tools and proactively creating and prioritizing high-impact opportunities to support evidence use at scale in local communities, we will increase the impact of interventions with a strong evidence base.

Widows of the Rwandan genocide grow coffee to support themselves in Lake Kivu, Rwanda. © 2017 Ilene Perlman on Shutterstock

ipa Innovations for Poverty Action

Advancing promising solutions along the path to scale

IPA and our partners are developing the most promising solutions in which to invest our learning and scaling efforts. To identify the 14 Best Bets: Emerging Opportunities for Impact at Scale, IPA's sectoral experts and scientific advisors reviewed hundreds of studies within and outside of our portfolio. The resulting list of Best Bets are those that, with further investments in evidence and policy efforts in the coming years, could become scalable solutions backed by solid evidence. They include interventions like cognitive behavioral therapy to improve mental health and reduce crime, or lipid-based nutrient supplements to support brain development of young children.

With additional investment, IPA will continue identifying interventions that are strong contenders for impact at scale and catalyze critical research and policy development on these programs. **This will foster more impactful programs and policies at scale, more effective and cost effective investments across the development field, and improve the lives of people living in poverty.**

ipa Innovations for Poverty Action

2 Long-term, sustainable change [$6M]

While facilitating the scale-up of specific evidence-based solutions can unlock large impacts in the short run, developing ecosystems of evidence use and generation has the potential to produce even larger gains in the long term.

IPA is working to **establish norms around the use of local evidence to increase the capacity to create and use evidence**, by strengthening the quality and supply of locally-produced evidence. IPA seeks to build evidence ecosystems driven instead by evidence users, such as country governments or nongovernmental organizations. Building local capacity to generate and use evidence will lead to better decision-making. For such a shift to take place, (i) researchers from low- and middle- income countries (LMICs) must be involved in and drive this work, and (ii) a culture and capacity to use data and evidence must be sustainably embedded within national organizations and governments.

IPA has successfully developed approaches to reach these goals in the last five years, and has a unique global and local network of researchers. Our strong presence in LMICs positions us to further this work.

Increasing involvement of local researchers

Greater diversity and insight into the local context can lead to higher-quality research and a more impactful and lasting
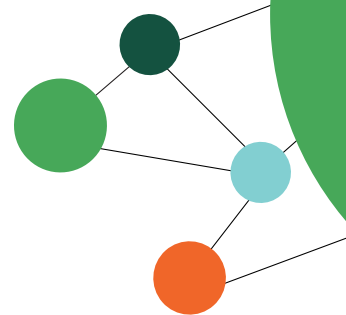
> 66 IPA has been at the forefront of the evidence-based policy movement and the partnership based model of working with the government offers enormous potential for scalable impact."
>
> — Cina Lawson, Togo's Minister of Digital Economy and Transformation and IPA Board Member

policymaking influence. To achieve this, more research must be led by researchers from the countries where we work. Yet researchers from LMICs are still a minority: in economics, for example, less than eight percent of the top five publications on Africa had an African co-author in 2020.[3]

In 2021, IPA embarked on a strategy to increase the **number of LMIC researchers** leading IPA's research. **We are building partnerships with LMIC-based universities, supporting researchers with project development and implementation, and providing matchmaking between researchers from different contexts.**

This is a multi-pronged issue that requires a multi-pronged strategy. Therefore, significant investments are needed if we are to reach our goal that two-thirds of our research projects involve an LMIC researcher by 2028 (up from one-third in 2021).

---

3. Obie Porteus, "Evidence from 27 Thousand Economics Journal Articles on Africa," Marginal REVOLUTION, September 10, 2020, https://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2020/09/evidence-from-27-thousand-economics-journal-articles-on-africa.html.

ipa Innovations for Poverty Action

Developing governments' capacity for evidence-based decision-making

IPA's Embedded Evidence Lab Program assists governments to institutionalize the use of data and evidence in their policymaking process. We collaborate with government agencies to establish Embedded Evidence Labs within their organizations, enabling them to use data and evidence to improve their decision-making, policies, and programs. IPA co-designs labs alongside government partners who request this support. The co-design process aims to ensure that the **Labs are effective in promoting the use of data and evidence while being institutionalized to become an integral and sustainable part of the government.**

The first such lab, MineduLAB, was established in Peru in 2016 and became a fully institutionalized government unit, independent of IPA's support, operated and funded by Peru's Ministry of Education. A number of interventions tested by MineduLAB were scaled. These interventions reached Peruvian students nationally with evidence-informed programming—for example, over 500,000 secondary school students were given information that was shown to help them better value their education and keep them in school.

IPA currently supports 24 labs across 16 countries within ministries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, responding to clear demand from policymakers, including the Ministries of Education in Rwanda and Uganda, and the ministries handling social protection programs in Zambia, Peru, and Togo.

We will invest in **new and early-stage Embedded Evidence Labs** in high-potential sectors and countries, to scope and perform initial demonstration, thereby helping unlock external funding. We will also fund projects that support the development or improvement of models, strategies, and tools to increase the impact of Labs. In parallel, IPA will expand the Embedded Lab Exchange program to enable cross-country learning on embedding evidence into government institutions, promoting local leadership of evidence-informed policy and practice.

Innovations for Poverty Action

2028 EXPECTED ACHIEVEMENTS

LMIC Researcher Engagement

The proportion of our research projects involving a researcher from an LMIC will have moved from less than one-third to over two-thirds.

Embedded Evidence Labs

- Five new Embedded Evidence Labs have been created, leading to a strengthened capacity for evidence generation and use.

- Three additional early-stage labs will have delivered robust proof-of-concept in this time frame.

- Millions of people will indirectly benefit from building a culture of and capacities for evidence use within ministries.

- In addition, we expect at least four labs to lead to specific programmatic or policy decisions (e.g., the scale-up of an effective intervention) that will directly benefit millions of people.

3 Accelerate impact with better, faster, cheaper data [$2M]

Data is how IPA creates evidence and evidence is how we affect change. Today, the data revolution is changing everything about how the world collects, analyzes, and interprets information. As social scientists committed to innovation and impact, IPA must invest in technological capacities that make our information better, faster, and cheaper in responding to the needs of decision-makers.

Creating better data

IPA is investing in more advanced data analytics methods like machine-learning algorithms for data quality control and Bayesian modeling, to create better data and facilitate advanced decision support for policymakers. For example, IPA is testing machine learning algorithms to improve data quality control, to better fine-tune poverty targeting, and to process large amounts of text data.

Making data faster and cheaper

IPA is leveraging social media messaging platforms and handheld devices, allowing researchers and policymakers to generate rapid, accurate data at a fraction of the cost of traditional methods. These innovations will make limited research funds go further. For example, IPA is conducting more surveys using WhatsApp and research on optimal methods for complementing in-person surveying with significantly cheaper phone and self-administered surveys, without compromising data quality.

With new funds, we will expand our capacity by establishing two technology hubs where teams of data scientists, software engineers, and product developers can collaborate to do this work. **These investments will allow us to generate more high-quality evidence and to do so faster, for maximum benefit to policymakers.**

2028 EXPECTED ACHIEVEMENTS

Investments will enable IPA to become the preeminent leader in data systems for global poverty reduction.

- Our partner government agencies and NGOs will have access, through IPA, to user-friendly data systems that enable them to integrate data analytics, monitoring and evaluation, and A/B testing using programmatic and administrative data.

- IPA will have created an open-access, searchable analytics and data platform to make it simple for researchers and policymakers to find and reuse IPA's wealth of data.

- IPA will have enabled new data hubs to undertake research utilizing administrative data from governments, commercial, and nonprofit organizations in countries where IPA works.

ipa Innovations for Poverty Action

Why IPA?

IPA is uniquely positioned to take on the multi-dimensional challenge of building sustainable evidence-informed decision-making at scale.

Over the last five years, we have learned that meeting this challenge requires a nimble, multi-pronged approach, including: building coalitions of partners; engaging with a multitude of actors, from government to media to civil society; proactively supporting the scale-up of evidence-informed programs; working with decision-makers to co-create evidence; and collaboratively institutionalizing cultures of using data and evidence in decision-making. These research, policy engagement, and implementation processes must be closely intertwined and involve co-creation and iteration between researchers and decision-makers.

> ❝ IPA plays a crucial role in assisting researchers to run and implement experiments throughout the world."
>
> **— Committee for The Prize In Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel**

IPA is well positioned to take on this challenge because:

- Our **long-term in-country presence** and staff in 19 countries allows us not only to run **high-quality research** but also to develop **long-term relationships with decision-makers,** enabling the iterative, co-creation process between researchers and partners that is necessary to ensure policy relevance and build ownership of evaluations and to seize windows to influence policies with evidence.

- We offer a **unique combination of research, policy engagement, and advisory services** capabilities, with more than 60 policy staff and 30 monitoring and evaluation advisors, in addition to our hundreds of research staff.

- We work with a **network of several hundred globally renowned academic researchers.**

- We have the **infrastructure and technical expertise to conduct high-quality research** in complex settings and on complex issues, to constantly innovate and to support research utilizing the most advanced techniques in data collection and analysis.
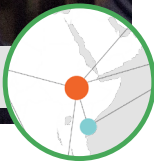
ipa Innovations for Poverty Action

Students at a Uganda Educate! partner school.
© 2019 Andrea Borgarello / Cartier Philanthropy

Join us

Be a part of IPA's future and invest in accelerating our shared vision of a world where evidence-informed decision-making saves and improves lives.

IPA Philanthropic Partnerships
donate@poverty-action.org
+1 (202) 386-6200 ext. 1

ipa
Innovations for
Poverty Action