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Poverty Action Lab Bridges the Gap Between Research and Action in Agricultural Development

Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) uses science-based evidence to inform agricultural policy and development.
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The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) (http://www.povertyactionlab.org/about-j-pal) is currently conducting several on-going evaluations on agricultural policies and programs that have been adopted by several developing countries.

With the support of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Department of Economics, J-PAL was founded in 2003 at MIT by professors Abhijit Banerjee (http://www.povertyactionlab.org/banerjee), Esther Duflo (http://www.povertyactionlab.org/node/546), and Sendhil Mullainathan (http://www.povertyactionlab.org/node/534). J-PAL conducts multi-year

randomized evaluations in a number of program areas, including agriculture (http://www.povertyactionlab.org/agriculture), environment (http://www.povertyactionlab.org/environment-energy), and microfinance (http://www.povertyactionlab.org/finance-microfinance), to test and improve the effectiveness of programs and policies intended to reduce poverty. The lab publishes its results and uses the findings in consultation with policymakers to ensure that policies being implemented are driven and supported by scientific evidence.

The lab's agriculture program focuses on researching the efficacy of policies and programs in less industrialized countries that have been put in place to increase agricultural productivity. The evaluations examine the factors behind the low uptake levels of newly available agricultural technologies in those countries and ascertain which technologies are most suitable for improving agricultural yields, food security, and nutritional intake in a given community.

Since 2009, the researchers at J-PAL have been collaborating with UC Berkeley's Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA) (http://cega.berkeley.edu/) to form the Agricultural Technology Adoption Initiative (ATAI) (http://atai-research.org/about-atai/overview/what-atai). The initiative promotes research that both identifies constraints that prevent poor farmers from adopting and benefiting from newer agricultural technologies and explores possible solutions to overcome those constraints.

The Initiative will fund between nine and twelve studies with a demographic focus on marginalized farmers—women, the destitute, and the poorly educated—and a geographic focus on Africa and South Asia. By partnering with development practitioners and funders to define the critical issues poor farmers face in facilitating and participating in agricultural development, the initiative aims to maximize the impact that their research has on the lives of the poor.

In an article in Arab News (http://news.yahoo.com/j-pal-improves-lives-millions-poverty-stricken-across-002900085.html), Fadi Jameel, president of Abdul Latif Jameel International, said, "The target of J-PAL program is to improve the quality of the life of 100 million people world-wide in five years. In three years J-Pal has already transformed the lives of 63 million."

In partnership with the Malawi Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, J-PAL has been investigating how social networks can be used (http://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/making-networks-work-policy-evidence-agricultural-technology-adoption-malawi) by farmers in the country to overcome information barriers that may prevent them from adopting agricultural technologies that have the potential to increase crop yields. The project used social networks to promote pit-planting, which has been proven to increase agricultural productivity in many African regions. The lab is also currently evaluating the barriers that women farmers in

Uganda face when implementing agricultural technologies (http://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/women-farmers-and-barriers-technology-adoption-rural-uganda).

J-PAL will be using the results gathered from its evaluations to support policy-making in Rwanda (http://www.rwandaeye.com/news/3347/mit-rwanda-to-partner-in-policy-making/). Last May, J-PAL hosted a symposium in collaboration with the Rwandan government (https://www.povertyactionlab.org/fr/event/rwanda-conference-2013)—attended by more than 80 government officials—where they discussed using research to inform policy-making in several areas, including agriculture. The conference initiated an on-going collaboration between J-PAL and a number of Rwandan government ministries, including the Ministry of Agriculture.

J-LAB recently completed the field study phase, lasting from 2009 to 2012, of an evaluation examining how agricultural production levels in Rwanda (http://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/promoting-agricultural-technology-adoption-rwanda) are affected when small farm holders are trained in agronomy—the use of science and agricultural techniques to improve the quantity and quality of agricultural yields.

"Massive efforts have been made to find the optimum method to utilize new inventions and new movements make a difference in the lives of those who actually need assistance. It is a very bold and advanced step. Though the program is an organic process, it has become hugely successful. Researchers are engaged in the analysis of actual life situations and the results have been found to be ground breaking and quite often it's totally unexpected," said Fadi Jameel (http://news.yahoo.com/j-pal-improves-lives-millions-poverty-stricken-across-002900085.html).

by Melody Ng (http://foodtank.com/biography/melody-ng)

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