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Advancing Evidence-Based Development Assistance: An Open Letter to President-Elect Biden and Vice President-Elect Harris from IPA

On behalf of the team at Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), congratulations to President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris on a hard-won victory. At this moment, we call on our new leadership to promote a culture of innovation and to commit to non-partisan policy-making that relies on science and evidence to inform international development. The U.S. has historically played a leadership role in funding and shaping international development assistance, serving as a global example on pressing issues including poverty, climate change, and reducing conflict. We are excited to see the U.S. resume this role, placing innovation, research, and development at the forefront of these efforts—investing in research, scaling what works, and divesting from what doesn't.

Now is the time for science to prevail—for evidence to inform not only the United States' own public health and pandemic response but also its support of the most vulnerable around the world.

As we have seen during the pandemic, and we see in our work every day, the world's poor pay disproportionately for poorly designed programs and policies. Ensuring that development assistance is data- and evidence-informed is not only an issue of effectiveness but also social and economic justice. Now is the time for science to prevail—for evidence to inform not only the United States' own public health and pandemic response but also its support of the most vulnerable around the world.

Here are three things the new Biden-Harris administration can do to advance the impact of the United States' development assistance through science-based leadership:

1. **Ensure use of evidence is central to the strategies of agencies responsible for administering development assistance.** The Foundations for [Evidence-Based Policy Making Act](#) or 'Evidence Act' (2018) provides a clear pathway for the development of learning agendas, resourcing, and use of data and evidence by U.S. development

agencies. USAID has embedded learning and evidence use in its evaluation policy, Journey to Self-Reliance, and Program Cycle, but these are yet to become part of the DNA of how the agency designs, implements and evaluates programs. We look forward to leadership and support from the Biden-Harris administration in ensuring that the focus on strategic and intentional learning remains at the forefront of all development assistance strategy and implementation.

2. **Foster—and incentivize the creation of—an innovation and learning ecosystem.** The tiered approach used by [USAID’s Development Innovation Ventures](#) provides a strong model for data-driven innovation: a [conservative estimate](#) of returns from just a few of their evidence-based investments have helped nearly 55 million people and yielded \$5 in benefit for every dollar spent on the program. Discovering and advancing what works requires innovation, testing, and continuously using data to refine and course correct. This kind of R&D capacity is critical to ensuring that the U.S. government’s development assistance is not only effective but also cost-effective.

Increasing investments in evidence-generation and other monitoring evaluation and learning activities that are tied to clearly defined learning agendas will help ensure that evidence gets used in the decision-making process. The U.S. government has immense potential to convene researchers and academics across the globe, fostering scholarly exchange and learning between researchers and decision-makers. Encouraging multi-disciplinary, cross-border exchange of ideas offers the opportunity to facilitate collaboration and partnership development between researchers, but also weave a strengthened web of evidence-informed learning. USAID’s Long Term Assistance and Services for Research (LASER) is a positive example of a funding mechanism that can tie research and learning to decision-driven development impact, while also bringing together low and middle-income country researchers with researchers from high-income countries to ensure contextualized policy-relevance.

We encourage the incoming administration to increase the level of funding for innovation and evidence generation, but also to ensure relevance and uptake of evidence by making ecosystem investments in partnership and learning.

3. **Invest in the institutionalization of data and evidence use overseas.** The U.S. government has the opportunity to not only use and promote evidence use in its own delivery but also support country government partners to do the same. The Millennium Challenge Corporation has, for instance, included [investments in governmental statistical capacities](#) in its Niger Compact to ‘*generate relevant, timely, gender-responsive and accurate productive sector data*’ and to ‘*analyze and inform the impacts of government policy*’. From IPA’s own experience delivering training to national statistics offices in West Africa, we have seen the scalable and sustainable impact that building this expertise can have on country-led use of data and evidence for decision-making. The Biden-Harris administration has an opportunity to not only put scientific approaches at the forefront of its own assistance, but support global partners to do the same.

At IPA we are not a partisan organization, nor do we get involved in party politics anywhere we work. But we do believe in and advocate for science and evidence-based approaches to reducing poverty. And we do work with administrations across political spectrums to ensure governments can improve the lives of the poor and marginalized around the world, both effectively and cost-effectively.

We are thrilled that science is such a key part of the Biden-Harris platform and we are looking forward to working with this new administration to bring about U.S.-led, evidence-informed change to improve lives around the world.

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