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Introducing IPA's Best Bets: Emerging Innovations in Global Development

Promising new innovations in the fight against poverty have the potential to improve lives on a massive scale. In a new report, IPA shares our “Best Bets” for these emerging innovations and the steps needed to take them to scale.

Since the early 2000s, the global development community has taken an increasing interest in using evidence to reduce poverty and improve the well-being of disadvantaged populations around the globe. Through rigorous testing and the use of data, funders, and implementers know more than ever about the impact and cost-effectiveness of different approaches.

This knowledge has produced meaningful changes. For example, organizations like Evidence Action and GiveDirectly have centered their programming on using evidence to improve lives, governments are embedding evidence use into their policies, and institutions committed to effective giving, like GiveWell and Open Philanthropy, have successfully funneled hundreds of millions of dollars to proven, cost-effective programs.

For the past 20 years, IPA has been at the forefront of rigorous research on poverty-related issues. Programs evaluated or provided technical support by IPA have improved hundreds of millions of lives, including by providing deworming pills to young learners, expanding access to safe water via chlorine dispensers, distributing free malaria bednets, scaling up the Graduation approach, and giving cash to poor families and individuals.

Yet the number of evidence-based programs that are operating at scale or have earned top status at charity-ranking organizations is still relatively small—and only address a slice of the challenges people living in poverty face. There is an important opportunity to address other solvable global development problems.



A community caretaker with two young twin boys in Gicumbi District, Rwanda (© 2019 Courtesy of Yagazie Emezi/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment)

With extensive research on hundreds of approaches, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is uniquely positioned to identify new interventions with transformative potential. To this end, IPA's in-house experts, researchers, and scientific advisors conducted a review of the impact and potential scalability of interventions in their fields, looking at the quality and amount of evidence from hundreds of studies, including the impacts observed, along with the cost and other scalability factors. **In conducting their review, IPA's experts identified approximately 50 pathbreaking innovations, backed by evidence, and divided them into three tiers:**

1. **Exploratory innovations:** Interventions that are supported by either a small amount of positive evidence from a small number of studies or conflicting evidence from multiple studies. More research is still needed to know if and how these programs really work. At this exploratory stage, IPA will seek to replicate the initial findings but in different contexts, and adjust program components with an aim to increase impact and/or reduce cost. We also start to build awareness among donors and policymakers regarding promising findings.
2. **Emerging innovations:** These approaches are supported by solid evidence—either several rigorous studies and/or particularly large and impressive effects—and have some commitment from partners, making them strong candidates to be scaled up. At this emerging stage, we conduct scale-up research to test different delivery models and start to answer questions about spillover effects and long-term results. We review the

main questions policymakers have about how and whether an intervention would work for them and address those questions through co-created testing and research. Moving forward, we will help assemble coalitions of implementers and policymakers to build momentum towards scale and provide evidence to make the case to funders for large-scale implementation.

3. **Established interventions:** These interventions are well-known and operating at scale. For established interventions, we work with governments and other implementers to improve delivery through building supportive policy and data environments. We provide assistance for better monitoring, evaluation, and learning. Rigorous evaluations can still be used strategically to refine interventions to improve impact and lower costs.

IPA's new report highlights 14 emerging innovations that are "best bets" because they have enough evidence behind them to give us confidence in their efficacy, but need additional investment in research and policy work to help take them to scale. **They are:**

- Small-quantity lipid-based nutrient supplements to reduce stunting
- Mobile phone reminders for routine childhood immunization
- Social signaling for routine childhood immunization
- Cognitive behavioral therapy to reduce crime
- Teacher coaching to improve student learning
- Psychosocial stimulation and responsive care to promote early childhood development
- Soft-skills training to boost business profits and sales
- Consulting services to support small and medium-sized businesses
- Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents to promote girls' agency and health
- Becoming One: Couples' counseling to reduce intimate partner violence
- Edutainment to change attitudes and behavior
- Digital payments to improve financial health
- Childcare for women's economic empowerment and child development
- Payment for ecosystem services to reduce deforestation and protect the environment

Many of these interventions address challenges such as violence and crime, malnutrition, intimate partner violence, and extreme poverty. Others are pioneering new approaches in sectors that have traditionally received more attention and funding, such as health. The interventions on this list are the product of years of effort by IPA and hundreds of collaborators, including implementing organizations, governments, academic researchers and peer research institutions, and funders.

Best Bets examines the nature of these innovations and why they were selected and provides a brief overview of the evidence on each innovation, cost information, and what needs to happen next. The report is an invitation for coalitions of implementers, researchers, and funders to capitalize on existing knowledge of what works to address some of the world's most pressing problems, and to invest in answering remaining questions as we scale these interventions.

We believe these Best Bets deserve to have a more prominent place in the development discourse, but we're equally excited about the exploratory interventions still being tested and

equally proud of the established interventions we've had a hand in bringing to scale.

Working in over 20 countries, IPA engages in a wide range of research and policy work to identify, advance, and support promising evidence-based innovations along all levels of the path to scale, from proof-of-concept to exploratory, emerging, and eventually established innovations making an impact at scale. This work cannot be carried out only by IPA—it requires many partners and peer organizations, as well as funding for program delivery and accompanying research and policy work. Investment is needed at every level to promote:

- More testing and development of proof-of-concept ideas to identify promising exploratory interventions.
- More replications of evaluations of exploratory interventions to confirm which are ready for scale.
- Better tools for evidence-based decision-making, including advanced cost-effectiveness analysis to inform scaling decisions.
- Coalitions of implementing organizations, policymakers, and funders to work together to move the most promising interventions to the next stage.
- A systemic culture of evidence-informed decision-making amongst implementers, including governments, who become routine creators and users of high-quality data and evidence.
- Funding institutions to build partnerships and coalitions with implementers for testing and expanding innovations at every stage along the path to scale.
- Organizations working in the evidence-to-impact space to help identify a broader set of interventions in areas where IPA has not focused to date.

We hope *Best Bets* will spark interest, discussion, and even debate about what we chose, what we missed, and what should be on our radar for the future. The next wave of development innovations is starting to take shape. New programs, with proven effectiveness, are improving the lives of people living in poverty. Investing in these efforts now can reduce suffering and support human flourishing for an untold number of people for many years to come. We hope that readers will take a look at the full list of interventions and look for ways they can be part of the effort to move ideas from concept to delivery at scale. Partnerships are needed at every level. We invite you to dig into the report [here](#).