

Norma Altshuler: Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Norma Altshuler, from the William and Hewlett Flora Foundation and I have the fun of being your moderator for today's session. It's been quite the day already. I think I've lost count at about 13 of the number of examples we've heard of how foreign aid uses evidence to maximize its effectiveness. This panel will give you another really interesting example of that. We're going to hear about how researchers and social entrepreneurs, despite having very, very different skill sets, come together to develop, test, and expand development solutions. We have two pairs of social entrepreneurs and researchers, who represent some of the leading examples of how this work has concretely improved the lives of millions of people. You'll hear today about work from Bangladesh all the way to Zambia.

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[00:01:00] First, Mushfiq Mobarak and Karen Levy will tell you how they have used, of all things, bus tickets to break seasonal cycles of poverty. They'll also talk about how evidence informed their decision making at every step of the process. Mushfiq is a professor of economics, and because that's not enough, of business at Yale, and among many, many other accomplishments, he's recently won a Carnegie Fellowship for the work that you'll hear about today. His partner in crime Karen is director of innovation at Evidence Action. Karen runs a unit that tests and builds business models for effective development solutions, and has worked with countless researchers like Mushfiq over the years.

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[00:02:00] We're also going to hear from Rukmini Banerji and John Floretta, who will talk about how they work with students who are many grade levels behind and help bring them up to speed in terms of basic literacy and numeracy. They'll also talk about how evidence has been a tool to help them integrate their work into really complex government systems. Rukminee is CEO of Pratham, which is I'm sure you all know, is one of the largest NGOs in India. Pratham has created a citizen's movement around education in India and has also worked with state governments around that country to improve their education programs.

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[00:02:30] Her partner John has worked with J-PAL to support this process. He's the director of policy and communications, and they've run more than 10 RCTs in partnership with Pratham. John supports governments, NGOs, and development partners in integrating evidence into their work, as in this example that you'll hear about. I'm going to ask some foundational questions, then I'm excited that we have the very first open Q&A of the day, so get your questions ready. We'll be sure to leave about 20 minutes for all of you. First, to lay the scene. Mushfiq, can you tell me about the problem that you teamed up with Karen to address, and your solution?

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Mushfiq Mobarak: Sure, so the problem is seasonality, or seasonal deprivation, seasonal poverty. This is a problem that's common to agrarian areas all over the world. In agriculture, you get most of your income during the harvest. I'll use the calendar in Bangladesh, which is where the work started. You get income during the main rice harvest in January, and you plant in August or September, and the period in between, this pre-harvest period, is a lean period, because there's not that much work to do. You're mostly waiting for the crop to grow. Wages fall, because the landless poor,

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who supply labor to other people's farms, their labor demand is low for their work.

[00:03:30] Unfortunately, it also happens to be the time when the price of rice spikes up. This combination of high prices and low wages leads to a much lower caloric intake. It takes the form of a seasonal famine in many places. In Bangladesh, it has a name, called monga, which means period of high prices, because it happens every year, it's an expected shock. In Malawi, and other places I've worked, it's called the hungry season. People are expected to go hungry. In Indonesia, where we're exploring the potential for this program, people are making do with two meals a day or not eating protein during that period.

[00:04:00] So now, as I said, it's an expected problem people know about. The government and the NGOs, Bangladesh rural areas are saturated with very high-quality NGOs, so they've been doing things like food for work programs or subsidized food distribution or targeted micro-credit. Those have the unfortunate side effect of keeping people exactly where they should not be, to collect and pay off the loans, or to collect the money. Right? We understand that there shouldn't be work here, because of the nature of the economy. The idea was, instead of trying to force job creation where the people are and jobs shouldn't be, why not move the people to where the jobs are? Because during the same period, the urban economy is not as, does not go through as much of a lean period. It's not as cyclical.

[00:04:30] That's where the bus ticket comes in. We've tried to encourage people to move. The combination of interventions that works well is to provide people a subsidy to travel, so they, it's a conditional cash transfer. If somebody from the household takes the money, they have to go, try to find work. It turns out, most people are very successful.

[00:05:00] Norma Altshuler: Thanks, Mushfiq. Karen, where do you come in?

Karen Levy: We have been working with Mushfiq and with implementing partners on the ground in Bangladesh. We're working most closely with RDRS, which is an old and very well-established NGO in Bangladesh, to bring all of the different stakeholders together and to turn the evidence into an actual program. Academic papers and evidence, as wonderful as they are, are not recipes for program design. You have to take those insights and work very closely with researchers and implementers to build a program model that is not only impactful but also cost-effective and able to be implemented in a systematic and high-quality way. That's what we've been working on, and bringing together all of the different stakeholders, whether it's funders, policymakers, researchers, implementers, to try and turn this idea into a program that can actually improve the lives of millions.

[00:05:30] Norma Altshuler: Give the audience a little sneak peek of everything you've done so far.

[00:06:00] Karen Levy: We started our collaboration with Mushfiq in around 2014, as after the initial paper was published. We've done a couple rounds of work together. As Mushfiq said, it is a seasonal program, so you get one chance a year to iterate on it in any particular context that you're working in. We've had a really good balance of, you know,

[00:07:00] interrogating the original design, doing a replication of the original study, but also very carefully undertaking a design process with implementing partners. We have slowly been scaling in size, year on year, building capacity with the implementing partner and coming up with something that can be delivered at scale.

Norma Altshuler: Thanks, Karen. Rukmini, let's turn to you. Tell us about the problem you took on and the solution you've come up with.

Rukmini Banerj: My work is made easier by Marcia, who had a whole panel on the problem, just before this, so if you missed that scintillating session, you've missed a real analysis. Also yesterday, the World [inaudible 00:07:23], their world development report, which focuses on exactly the problem. So we're either behind the times or ahead of the game, I don't know which. Basically in many countries like India, enrollment levels are now very high. We have in India more than 96% kids who are enrolled in school. At some level the enrollment task is almost done, but then if we look at, are children learning? We see big gaps.

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[00:08:00] The often cited figure in India, in fifth grade, at least half the kids are not even at second grade level. If we want to benefit from this massive expansion of schooling, we have to do something to make learning and schooling align, and that's what we do. We try to figure out how you can get large numbers of children caught up to speed, to be able to benefit from what's going in the school quickly.

Norma Altshuler: So for the people who had the bad luck of missing the last panel, give us one minute on what your actual approach looks like.

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Rukmini Banerj: The solution that we do, which actually J- PAL has named Teaching at the Right Level," I mean, it's completely common sense. You look at what kids, where they're at right now, and start teaching them from there, rather than teaching them what they ought to know. If I have to put it in a simple line, I'd say, "Teach children, and not curriculum." So the curriculum should be for the children, but in case it's higher than where it ought to be, start where the kids are, and move onwards.

Norma Altshuler: Thank, Rukmini. John, tell us about the role J-PAL has played in this partnership.

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John Floretta: J-PAL has played the role of, initially, the evaluator of Teaching at the Right Level programs. Over the last 15 years, we've collaborated on over 10 RCTs in total and six on the Teaching at the Right Level program. A lot of it has been an iterative approach to look at the potential to scale. The early studies were done in 2002 to 2005, and were largely proof of concept studies. Rukmini doesn't like it when I say this, but one way I think about teaching at the right level is as like a supplementary remedial education model. The early studies were looking at, if you did it an hour and a half in school, or you did in camps out of school, does this work in increasing basic numeracy and literacy? The answer was is that, it still holds, is that it's one of the most effective and cost-effective programs we have evaluated. We did it through a randomized control trial, which is J-PAL's specialty, between 100 and 200

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schools in most of these studies.

[00:10:30] Then the next phase was, okay, well, there's 200 million kids in primary level in India. How do we think about testing that so it can be scaled in the existing school system? At first, this is I think a special part of the program, is it's not like you test something, it works and then you scale it to ... Pratham has now reached 50 million kids. It was an iterative process that involved failure, so in the second phase, it was like, okay, what if we put these materials into the classroom? Will it work? Will teachers use it? The answer was no.

[00:11:00] Well, what if we put the materials and trained the teachers? Will it work? The answer was also no. By the time you get to the third phase, it was this idea that you needed to signal that it was important for governments to implement the program. One way that was done was by dedicating an hour of the school day to focus on this, creating that space and that time. Then another was leveraging existing resources in this school education program. There's this one is to 15 schools, the assistant block resource coordinator, who would visit schools. What Pratham was able to do was to leverage them as a mentor and monitor of the program.

[00:11:30] That's been our key role, has been as an evaluator. What's been really exciting and really interesting is, now we think that there's two models that are ready for scale and have been scaled. Then the J-PAL Africa team and the J-PAL Lat team have been involved in working with Pratham, so the fact that underpinning this program is that there's large heterogeneity of learning levels in classes. Many kids are not at grade level, and yet there's incentives for teachers to teach to the top of the class.

[00:12:00] Well, you see that same type of problem also in certain places in Africa and certain places in Latin America, so the next role that J-PAL has been playing is not to do more randomized control trials, although we are doing that in India, but has been to work with Pratham and governments in Africa to transplant, adapt, and scale this program in other contexts.

[00:12:30] Norma Altshuler: Thanks, John. Tell the audience, where are you concretely in terms of the reach of the program in India and in Africa?

John Floretta: Well, I should say that Pratham is the one implementing, leading implementation or technical support for governments to implement the model. My understanding is last year, academic year, 4.76 million kids in India benefited from the program. As [00:13:00] was mentioned in the last panel, J-PAL Africa and Pratham have been involved in getting this set up in 80 schools, together with support from the U.S. government in Zambia, and recently, there's been a commitment to go to scale this up to 2,000 of the 7,000 primary schools in Zambia. Then there's some people on our team who are fresh back from an initial scoping visit to set up a small pilot in rural Peru.

Norma Altshuler: Great. So as we dive into the details of the programs, few things that I'm [inaudible 00:13:29] helpful to take away are that first these programs are super low-cost. My understanding is a round-trip bus ticket, I can get for \$12. Is that right?

Mushfiq Mobarak: That's right.

Norma Altshuler: Teaching at the Right Level is also even cheaper within government systems. Second, that they're relatively straightforward, although there's been a lot of hard work put on them. Another is that there's a lot of work that's been done in terms evidence-informed scale, but also that there's a lot more work to do, that we'll hear about in a second. Mushfiq, tell us more about, how do you make sure evidence is actionable?

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Mushfiq Mobarak: Okay, sure, so I should start by telling you what the evidence was that we acted on, and then talk about how we're iterating. Yeah, so what I'll go through is, I did a randomized control trial back in 2008, along with co-authors. Like if I were to title this, what I'm about to say, it would, "I gave people bus tickets and you won't believe what happened next." [inaudible 00:14:28] Here's what happened. Once we provide a subsidy, conditional on somebody traveling, you can get people to move. An additional 25% of households decided to try it out. Okay? People are already migrating, but the migration rates jumps up to about 60%. T

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hen once they try it out, so when you're induced to migrate, the experiment shows that your family who remains back at home, mostly the wife and the children, they get to consume 600 calories per person per day more. It was a surprisingly large effect for me, so they moved from two meals a day to three meals a day. This program really hit, these results are driven by people who are extremely poor who were making do with about twelve, thirteen, 1,400 calories. It's not making people rich, it's just allowing them to eat properly for those three months.

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Then result number three, which is also surprising, is that a year later, three years later, I did not repeat the program, I just continued collecting data, and a lot of the people who were induced to move chose to go back, re-migrate on their own, paying for their own costs. Okay? So now, so this is, these are the basic set of results that I think I got social entrepreneur types and funders excited. When we started having this conversation, my first reaction was, I mean, it's great that you're excited. However, I showed you these results with an experiment with 2,000 households. If you start inducing 20,000 people or 200,000 people to move, the same results might not apply. If I move out a lot of people from rural areas, it will change the structure of that rural economy, and we need to understand that.

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A worry might be that if all the able-bodied men leave, or all the skilled workers leave, that might reduce productivity in the village and make it more difficult for the people remaining behind. Right? On the other hand, if you scale up at the level of 200,000, it might start testing the absorptive capacity of the city. It might change labor market conditions at the destination. We'd like to understand that as well. These are the things that in economics we call general equilibrium effects, like market-level effects when you scale things up. It's important also from the academic side for us to understand these effects that only come about at scale, that you don't necessarily get to see when you run the first trial at a pilot scale.

[00:17:00] The other sets of things I was worried about is not just the economics of this, but what happens when lots of people migrate? What if that changes the relationship between the husband and the wife? What if divorces go up? What if the migrant brings back diseases to the village? What happens to the children? Do women start making more decisions in the household? It could be positive or negative, but whatever the answer is, we need to know. That's where our conversation was. I said, yes, I mean, I'd love to help and participate in this process of scaling up, but we need to be true to the evidence.

[00:17:30] I should say that a lot of this evidence generation for the first three years was supported by, in a big way, the U.K. Department for International Development, the U.S. Department of Labor, AusAid, which is Australian development agency that no longer exists, I think, not because of this project. In spite of this project. It was very helpful to get all that support that allowed us to be creative, experiment, and experiment at increasing larger scales.

Norma Altshuler: Karen, you're a social entrepreneur. Social entrepreneur moves fast, iterates quickly, and yet you've worked with many researchers who may move slightly less fast. Tell us why that's been helpful to your impact.

[00:18:00] Karen Levy: I've made a career out of managing researchers, I think. No, I think we really actually started in a very good place with this program, in particular because Mushfiq had already asked some of the questions about iterating on program design. He had already looked at some key questions, like loans versus grants, or how much of this is about the information that you give that jobs may be available or not. But nonetheless, there are still lots of questions you asked about, you know, making evidence actionable. In working together, we've been able to answer some of those questions that have fed into program design. Support from donors like GiveWell Advise Donors, like Good Ventures, but also the Global Innovation Fund, have given us the resources and the space to do this experimentation and to build the program model as we go.

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[00:19:00] An example of this is, we did a round of research in which we varied the intensity in which the program was delivered in villages. In some villages, 10% of the eligible households received the stipend, and in others, 50% received the stipend. Now I should probably let Mushfiq summarize the results, but I'll try. What we found is that in the higher intensity villages, not only did the people who were offered take up at a higher rate, but even people around them, people who were not offered the stipend. This is almost like a positive externality, a spillover effect that was a good thing for the program.

[00:19:30] Now that has really influenced program design, in that we make sure that we offer this product in village meetings rather than door to door, because we want to create a situation of common knowledge, where everybody knows that they've been offered, but they also know that their other neighbors have been offered. It has also changed how we plan the scale-up. We are trying to saturate villages

[00:20:00] rather than spreading this out more thinly over a wider area, because we think we can literally get more bang for buck in doing so. That's very much an evidence-based decision, based on work coming out of this partnership.

Mushfiq Mobarak: Let me just add to that, that these questions were, it's great that it was operationally relevant, but these are also questions at the frontiers of academic research. We'd like to understand what happens at the market level. We'd like to understand, are there complementarities in decision making? In this case, we'd like to understand, is it really risk of failure at the destination that was preventing people from traveling? Right? One way that the program seems to be working is that when people travel together, they can share that risk, they can share accommodations. We collect data on all of this. They travel together, and if three people go together and one person doesn't find a job, it's not as bad. Right?

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Norma Altshuler: One thing I'm hearing from you is that evidence designs program design, but also that once you have promising results, you keep going, but you keep going at a cautious pace to make sure that you see the same impact as you grow.

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Mushfiq Mobarak: Let me give you the precise number. The original result, as I said, was about 2,000 households. There we focused on the beneficiaries themselves, what happens to their lives and their families, their wives and their children. Then when we wanted to go to the next phase, we started looking at, okay, what happens to the village in general? That's where the 10% versus 50% variation comes in. If I have a big shock in some villages, what happens to the people remaining behind? For that, we went to a scale of a population of 36,000 households, and we made about 6,000 offers. But that scale itself is not big enough for us to understand what would happen in cities. The reason is, in Bangladesh is the most densely populated country in the world, with 150 million people. Even second-rate towns, 6,000 people coming in would be a drop in the bucket.

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This year, we've scaled this up to about 150, 160,000 offers, and we've designed the research in order to now study, okay, what would, can I link the origin villages to particular cities and sectors, and then can I study what's happening in those cities and sectors?

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Norma Altshuler: Rukmini, I want to ask you and John about some of what you've learned about relationships in this process.

Rukmini Banerj: I kind of want to just take what they said a little bit further, that one way that I see, and I'm hearing across panels here, is that you do some and then you do some more and then you study it and do some more. I think quite early on in our process, we felt that if we have an answer to like a really big problem, then you can do both of these things simultaneously. Our confidence of kind of learning from a evaluation while it is on the ground, and mixing it up with the experience that we're having quite large-scale around it, you know, has proven to be quite successful. While we run, while there is an impact evaluation running in the middle of the program, we often run our own measurements, which are a lot simpler and

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faster for a much larger set of programs that are going on.

[00:23:30] In doing all of these, I think we found that the more people who, the more people who understand and I think this came up in the last panel as well, the more you understand and feel the problem, the more likely you are to work on it urgently. I think one of the most powerful ways for people to feel the problem, and I see this in, for example, I remember being in a government meeting where the senior bureaucrats were much more hands-off and having a much more, kind of a conceptual discussion on issues of learning and schooling. One of my younger colleagues was with me, I could feel that he was getting really frustrated. When we came out, he said to me, "There's only one way you'd want to solve the problem is if you feel the problem yourself." I think that in feeling the problem, which is where I think a lot of the next stage processes start, if you actually work with kids, you feel it right away.

[00:24:00] Our, the beginning of any of our Teaching at the Right Level, in fact, the big surveys that we do in India just outside of all of this, the ASER survey, is an attempt to make people feel the problem first-hand. Because if you feel there's a ten-year-old, and he's struggling to read a word, it's very hard to walk away. I think the first level of relationships are made at that point. If you have more teachers who spend, you know, five minutes at the beginning of the school year feeling the problem of each kid, it's very difficult then to go back to a really tough curriculum and want to teach that. If you have parents who feel that my kid is almost there, he just needs a little bit of help. The really hard part is how do you get the really high-ups to come down to feel the problem.

[00:24:30] I think that this building of both, you feel the problem, you feel you have an answer. What John spoke about, that we work a lot of with the layer just above the teachers. Because you have a lot of teachers, you have lots of schools, but in the Indian system, you often have somebody at a cluster level. They have different names in different states, but they are at the level where they deal with 15 schools or 20 schools. At that level, if that person who is a government functionary, actually assesses kids and then teaches them for 20 or, whatever, 25 days, that's enough time to feel a lot of progress.

[00:25:00] The second thing about I think building trust and faith and building the urgency is to feel that you can do the progress yourself. One of the most exciting things I've heard today is when the team from Zambia was talking about exactly the same kinds of dynamics between people that we see in India. I think these are universal things, you must feel the problem, you must feel like you can be part of the solution. Then you feel like you can motivate other people.

Norma Altshuler: What role do hard numbers versus the experiential stuff play in helping you spread the feeling of the problem?

[00:25:30] Rukmini Banerj: I would say that, you know, while you feel things are not good, the simple assessment that we use has played a big role in making the problem concrete. Now

[00:26:30] unfortunately, I'm not sitting here with my purse, because I usually take the tool out, and it's very useful. Because our tool is just, you know, letters, words, like simple lines, and a story. Even if you are an illiterate parent, the visual image of the tool is very powerful. You are able to see what is more difficult than others, and you're able to say, well, if my child has spent three years in school, surely he ought to be able to do this. If somebody actually reads that out, you can understand it, this.

[00:27:00] I think that the data that is produced at the child level, your child's testing happening in front of you, your hamlet's testing happening around you, your village report card, your class report card, if it's happening in school, these are all very, I mean, this is data as well. This is data that sort of spurs you to action. I think we've found that that whole process being simple, for a lot of people to understand, has really helped spur the action.

Norma Altshuler: Terrific. John, you alluded to earlier millions of children served in India. I'm hoping you and Rukmini can tell us a little bit about the government partnerships you've built there.

John Floretta: Great, yeah. I think, you know, in terms of the partnership between Pratham and J-PAL, I'll just say one line on that. I think what's kept it going, there's three of our directors, maybe five additional affiliated professors have all been a part of this partnership. I think it's, as Rukmini said, is that Pratham doesn't feel that anyone is doing a randomized control trial on them. Like it's part of, it's one small part, but a significant part of their overall process of learning, and I think that curiosity of what else we can learn together is something that has kept this partnership flourishing.

[00:28:00] For the government, I'd be interested in Rukmini's thoughts on it, but you definitely need some, basically, what are we talking about? We're talking about for the model that is in schools, it's like out of the five hours per day, they spend one hour organizing kids in grades three through five by their level, rather than their age.

[00:28:30] Part of it is like dedicating time, making sure there's a clear time for that. Part of it is having mentors and monitors visit the school. But part of it also is this signal from the top, from the government that they care about this program, and so I think that's, there's another RCT that's being set up now that's going to look at, if you, someone high in the system sends a letter to the teacher that says, "We care about raising basic math and language," and on the back of that would have some information about school performance and literacy and numeracy.

[00:29:00] Just the fact that there's high-level attention focusing on these basic problems, I think will be really interesting to see how that interacts with the Teaching at the Right Level approach. I think that's a really key aspect of building a partnership with government.

Norma Altshuler: Rukmini, do you want to add on?

Rukmini Banerj: Yeah, so being a Hindu, I don't know if there were any RCTs done on the spread of Islam or Christianity, but I think we need some of those core principles, because

[00:30:00] when you spread something that's really important ... You know, clearly there are some key things that move forward. The panel that before us kind of tried to outline some of these commonalities across. I think that this, you know, some of the things that have to be built ... I mean, the government is people as well. That's, it's not like the government and the schools are some other kind of institutional structure and people are somebody else. I think the same processes work, but it's just larger and little bit more sluggish.

[00:30:30] I remember a phone call I had a few years ago. At my age, I can tell if it's a young person or not. If it's a young person, you want to help them, because they are, you know, for obvious reasons. He said to me, this was from my own home state, which is Bihar, where attendance levels are quite low. Enrollment is high everywhere, but attendance varies a lot in India. The state was paying a lot of attention to attendance at the time. This person who phoned me was the head of a district. A district in India could be anywhere between a thousand to 3,000 schools.

[00:31:00] He said, "You know, I've tried everything. People say inputs are important, so we have schools, we have, I mean we still could do with a few more teachers, but we have plenty of teachers. People say entitlements are really important, cash transfers, you name it, we've given them all. Then you say that accountability is important, so I'm driving my people hard to visit and monitor. But attendance is not going up. I'm kind of at wit's end about what to do to raise attendance." On the phone, I said, "Well, one of the things is, if the kids don't have a good time in school, they don't want to come." I mean, parents can send you, but you don't have to go. It's in the village, you can go and play cricket, whatever.

[00:31:30] Once the kids feel that something is happening, then ... I analyzed it in the same way, that the curriculum is very high, very over-ambitious, and so the kids are not at the level of the curriculum. The teacher in our system teaches from the textbook of the class. So maybe this misalignment, where really the parents are disappointed in the school, the children are disinterested, and the teacher feels very disheartened, that I'm working hard, but nobody is coming. It's like nobody is at fault, but something is really wrong.

[00:32:00] We said we'd meet in a couple of days. I went to that district, and in the meanwhile, he had actually done the assessment in about 10 schools, with his own team, using his own tools, but they had come to the same conclusion, that there is this big misalignment between what the children are being taught, and where they are at. Now in this case, you know, you're already halfway there, because somebody was really wanting to solve a problem. The problem was actually a different problem, he thought. The fact that attendance and learning were very closely, I still don't know what is a cause and what is a consequence, but these two move together.

[00:32:30] The next job was his being convinced and the 10 people who went testing with him had also seen the situation on the ground, right? So we already had about 30-odd people within the district, 20 people is almost enough to change a thousand schools, because you have the leadership. The people who felt the problem had

[00:33:00] already started coming up with a solution. Within about 20 days, they felt that they had raised children's levels. Attendance had started going up. You know, once you have these weapons, or what I call conversion, then it's easier to convert the other people.

In all of this I think that the motivation, the human angle, and you know, I don't know what it's like with the bus tickets or livelihoods. With kids, I feel we have an easy way, because kids respond very well to something that goes well with them. As a teacher, if you feel that you have changed the life of this kid in the last one month, you're likely to want to do more. I don't know if I answered your question.

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Norma Altshuler: That was great, but you didn't. I'm hoping, having seen your work in the field in India, one of the things I've been impressed by is how much ownership government officials themselves have taken of the program, and how in many places, it's a government program. Can you or John just give us 30 seconds on where things stand with that?

Rukmini Banerj:

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It varies. I mean, we shouldn't also glamorize because, you know, with a lot of ownership issues, ownerships come and ownerships go as well. I think that the more people who have actually tasted success, feel it's their own program. We have, implementation capacities may vary across states and they vary across time. We feel that, and also there is a bigger landscape out there. I think 10 years ago, talking about learning was like a new thing, but today, it's like, everybody is talking about it, I think there are different things that are being tried. The broader environment for actually moving towards improving learning is also much more conducive.

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Some of the basic problems of just access have also come a long way. The time is right, I think, and therefore, it's more important at this time to come up with solutions that are working, that are durable, that are doable, because then an option can be much faster.

John Floretta:

You said 15 seconds.

Norma Altshuler:

Great.

John Floretta:

[00:35:00]

One key thing that when you have a basic understanding of the basic principles of why this works and several types of experiments is that it makes it easier to apply in other contexts. I think a thing that's helpful for governments is that it doesn't matter so much if it happens during the school day or at camp after school, that there's many different iterations that have been tested. A government can kind of match these key principles to its context in a more straightforward way. It's not a cookie-cutter approach that we come with a solution that you then need to implement. I think that's really useful in buying the credibility of the program with governments.

Norma Altshuler:

Well, John, that's the perfect lead-up to what I wanted to ask you about next,

[00:35:30] which is your expansion in Africa. Tell me a little more about happened and what you're doing there.

John Floretta: It happened, I mean, a lot of what we do at J-PAL is go and meet with different ministries of education for education programs, for example, and you know, try to learn as much as we can about the context, what problems they're concerned about. It so happened in Zambia, one of the key issues that government was concerned about was low learning levels in primary school. We were able to show not only evidence from India, about this kind of tailoring education through a supplementary model to the level of the child, but also from the IPA's work in Ghana, and IPA has been very helpful in Zambia, by the way. They have a country office there. As well as some earlier foundational work in Kenya.

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[00:36:30] So what has been interesting is, that got them excited, and we were able to build the coalition of also local partners, who were interested in investing in this. We didn't do a randomized control trial, but we, in 80 schools, set up three different models. One was during the vacation time for limited, a camp-based model. One was during the busy testing time for older kids, one was through the second semester. Setting that up, what was interesting was, there was a crucial role of

[00:37:00] actually, I think this gets at many of the points that Rukmini has been making, of helping the Zambians actually see the program. These learning visits to India, to get a sense of kind of, below the numbers and the academic paper of effectiveness or the brochure, what does this program actually look like? What are the key drivers? That was very, very important.

[00:37:30] Then I think it was really important that we did different things with the Zambians. We tested these three different iterations, and then when we were asking, okay, if you're interested in scaling this up, and both the USAID mission in Zambia, the USAID Africa region, the USAID education division, they were interested in supporting the scale-up, and kind of looking at sending that signal. Then it was to the government of Zambia to decide which of these models it wanted to focus on. I think it's gotten me very excited, not only about Teaching at the Right Level, but just thinking about how global evidence can be mapped to local context, how you can pilot something and then breathe life and build coalitions for scale. USAID from a technical perspective, but then also from a financial perspective from the mission was essential in doing that.

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Norma Altshuler: Rukmini, USAID was important earlier in the process as well, right?

Rukmini Banerj: Yeah, so I would say that in this partnership that we've had, where you are implementing sometimes ongoing programs and sometimes new ideas, but matching it with someone who is along with you to study it, we've had several episodes of this. One was with the Hewlett Foundation, who also supported, you know, both sides. The learning from the experiment was almost as important as doing the experiment. Then more recently we had a DIV grant, which allowed us to really study, which allowed us to actually try, I would say, an extreme version of our Teaching at the Right Level in the worst part of India, to see ... By this time, we had the confidence that even if we fail terribly, we'd learn a lot. You have to do

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something out of ...

[00:39:30] As it turned out, it was a very successful experiment, but even the DIV funding for the evaluation and for the intervention went very well together, because you kind of needed both. Because we had had this foundation, once this was over, we were able to find other funds to, for example, do the intervention in the control schools the following year. Then we convinced J-PAL that you can't just drop it now, I mean, okay, everybody is going to say, okay, these are all very fast results and maybe all the gains have gone away, so two years later, please come back and do end line two. I mean, end line is supposed to be end line, but now there's an end line two, because you know we believe in afterlife.

[00:40:00] Some funds were found from somewhere to do that. The basic foundation of doing the first evaluation and the intervention, and then because that was there, it seemed too good to just leave. So I think that (a) people who will fund both, you know, hopefully there are some in the room, I hope you're listening, this is really important. I think that also putting your faith in possibly risky, ambitious things and having the faith that people will learn good things out of it, and then you'll be invited to Washington to tell everybody about it, really helps.

[00:40:30]
Norma Altshuler: I have one or two more questions for Karen and Mushfiq, and then it's over to you, so get ready. Karen, tell me about what's your next chapters are with No Lean Season.

Karen Levy: Yeah, so I think there are a few things I'm excited about next. I mean, obviously we're really keen to continue to explore the impact of the program and scalability and really try and push the size of the program as big as we can, while still being careful to measure some of these other effects that we want to be careful about.
[00:41:00] Certainly scaling in Bangladesh. I'm really excited to explore new contexts, that this might work, and also to find out where it might not work. We had looked at potentially Malawi and Zambia as a place that this might have an impact, and found that in fact it wouldn't, for a variety of reasons. Sometimes using the evidence to decide where not to pursue something is as powerful a lesson to learn. We think that there might be reason to explore this program in Nepal. We're doing some experimentation in Indonesia now. Certainly pushing the limits of scale for this particular model.
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[00:42:00] I also think that anytime you create a program at scale, when you have something that you're implementing regularly, that creates a platform on which you can build potentially other programs. We're really excited to collaborate with Mushfiq and with other researchers to see how we can leverage this delivery platform and generate cost-effective impact in other ways. I think finally, as we've alluded to, I think that the No Lean Season program, in particular as it moves towards scale, really has the potential to contribute to the generation of knowledge about the science of scaling. How do we think to start to think about general equilibrium effects? How do we start to think about some of these larger questions about political economy, things that are much harder to answer in individual proof-of-

[00:42:30] concept RCTs? You can only even start to think about asking those questions when you have a program big enough to push against the edges. My hope is that this program as it scales gives us the opportunity to engage in those questions.

Norma Altshuler: Fantastic. Mushfiq, you touched on this earlier, but you mentioned the Department of Labor support, the role of Global Innovation Fund which of course is funded by USAID as well as other partners. Tell us a little more about what role that support has played and what kinds of ways you think that U.S. foreign assistance can help with this work.

[00:43:00] Mushfiq Mobarak: Of course, most simply, money is useful for research, but beyond that, having the money from donors who have a reputation for being very, very careful, it sells, lends some signal of credibility, which is also very useful for us. The third thing is in the process of generating the money, or those discussions, that raised important questions that made me think more carefully about things. I actually learned a lot from the process of interacting with donors, interacting with people who have much more implementation on the ground experience than I do. That was really useful as well.

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[00:44:00] Let me actually say a couple of things that I heard from the conversations earlier about the role of government and what I've learned through this process. On the government side, in Bangladesh, it turns out, so that's a context I know very well. I grew up in Bangladesh. It's actually possible for you to get a lot of things done without having a close partnership with the government, just because NGOs in Bangladesh operate like a parallel government. Like BRAC is large enough and provides the same set of services that in other countries, only governments provide. They have their own schools, health [inaudible 00:44:17] et cetera, and the RDRS, our partner, has that kind of a stamp in northern Bangladesh where we're doing our work.

[00:44:30] When we were going to Indonesia, I learned very quickly that you cannot do things that way at all. Every single time I need to visit a village in Timor, I need to get a letter from Jakarta and take it with me, and say, "You can talk to me. Look." Also, some other things we learned that's not, you know, where the program works but not the specific design features support so well. In Indonesia, in Timor, where people have a lot more land, population density is a lot lower, they don't want to migrate during the pre-harvest period, because that's a period that they need to stay back and work on their own land, to do the weeding, et cetera, but they are hungry during that period. But they are willing to migrate after the harvest, when they have nothing to do, thinking ahead to the fact that next pre-harvest season, I'm going to be hungry.

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[00:45:30] Then I were to take this to Africa, we would worry a lot more about diseases coming back to the village. Those are the things that we'd need to generate more evidence on and be careful about. In Indonesia what we're doing now is, what we're doing there today is exactly where I was in Bangladesh 2008. We're going through the same process carefully. Research can also help us understand, think

about the politics and the government interaction that came up in the conversation. Just like these examples I was giving where if I scale a program up, there are different types of market effects, the program itself changes.

[00:46:00] When I scale programs up, governments start paying more attention. Right? There's another program that I've done at large scale in Bangladesh on sanitation, like trying to get rural toilet uptake. What happened there was, we covered an entire district with treatment control areas, and then in the weekly call I have with my field team, they were like, "Oh, you know, the local union [inaudible 00:46:10] chairman wants to come and give speeches at our like subsidy distribution events. Will that affect the research? Should we ask, allow them to do it?" My reaction was, of course, we cannot not allow them to do it, because I don't want the program to stop, but we need to randomize something about it and learn from it.

[00:46:30] Norma Altshuler: Great. Well, Mushfiq said smart questions are helpful, so let's turn it over to all of you. There's a microphone right in the center.

Chelsea: Hi, I'm Chelsea [Dubart 00:46:37] from GiveWell. What could the sector do to encourage more partnerships, like research and implementation partnerships, like the successful partnerships we've heard about today? Thanks.

Norma Altshuler: Karen, do you want to start?

[00:47:00] Karen Levy: Sure. I think these partnerships take time, right? We're very lucky to have a research partner to work with who has been looking at this for a long time, who is patient and willing to be flexible in what he's interested in looking at and compromise. Not every question is immediately useful to a program and not every question is immediately interesting to a researcher. I think if funders and partners and stakeholders in general understand that these relationships, these partnerships can be more than the sum of their parts and allow for aspects of studies to be built in that might not answer questions that we need to know today, but can help us answer longer term research agenda or learning agenda questions, that will bring in the best minds, like Mushfiq, like J-PAL affiliates, et cetera, to the table, and can also give a platform for implementers to make it worth it to hold those control groups aside and do all of the things that you need to do to get the level of rigor that's necessary for this type of research. Patience, flexibility, openness to both obvious and indirect questions, I think, are things that come to mind for me.

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[00:48:30] Mushfiq Mobarak: I would add to that that even on the rigorous evidence side, today in all the panels today, we've heard a lot about data, but we've been talking a lot about empirical work. Something that came from John's comment was that principles also matter. Right? That's equally important, and we, I think we don't pay sufficient attention to it. In this case for example, when I told you these results that, look, if I induce people to go, first of all, they go, their families eat a lot more, then they chose to go back on their own. The question that should puzzle you that puzzled me for a couple of years and had me working for a couple of years is, then why the heck do

you have to run this program? People should have been going already.

[00:49:00] If I don't understand what that underlying principle is, what was preventing them from going, then I don't understand under what conditions will this program work in other, what are the conditions I should be looking for, for me to take it somewhere else? I think if we also had, in the process of generating evidence and the funding stream, et cetera, I think people should also encourage researchers to think about general principles and not just evidence on a particular program in a particular place.

Norma Altshuler: John?

John Floretta: Could I just, to add to that, is that I absolutely agree, and I think what's been completely fortunate is in this case is that there's been donors who have been willing to support the original evaluations, which is critical. There's also been donors who, at least in the case of Zambia, and true in Africa, or in India as well, have been willing to support the scale-up. So in Zambia, going to 2,000 schools. Once you've kind of reverse-engineered the principles through the research, like Mushfiq is talking about, then you need to, if you want to influence policy in other places, you need to apply those principles, those general principles, to local context. That takes time and that takes money.

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[00:50:30] You can't just take the program that was done in India and do it in Zambia. You need to basically understand the local context, think about how the key principles map, and that is an underfunded gap, both to do this translation work of global evidence to local context, as well as to set up small-scale pilots. So my assumptions that, yes, I think in the local context, things will move this way in line with the general principles, but I want to do it at small-scale first, and then I'm ready to apply for a large-scale grant for scale-up.

[00:51:00] What we find is that, you know, right now in Africa together with Pratham, we've started conversations with governments who are interested in the program, in Burkina Faso, in Cote d'Ivoire, in Nigeria, in Niger, in South Africa, in Uganda. There's tons of opportunity, but it takes time to be able to go back and map things to their context and do that piloting. So while there sometimes are pots of funds that I can apply for to scale, that translation work, and evidence actually does the same type of translation work, is absolutely essential. If we want to see research translated into policy to improve lives, that's I think a missing piece at the moment.

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Rukmini Banerj: I'm not sure she wanted four answers, but I have to add my [inaudible 00:51:49]. I think there are two more, not more, two things that I'd like to add. One is as implementers, I feel it's important to be curious. You know, you're doing something, but can it be done better? Is this the right thing that I should be doing? I mean, even in education, as an organization like ours, should we be doing pre-school, should we be doing, I mean, what is it that ought to be done? More importantly, what are we capable of? I think this kind of being a little bit skeptical, being a little frustrated, I think is very productive for having questions and then being open enough to have other people kind of have other questions or help to

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[00:52:30] share your questions.

[00:53:00] The second thing is I think what John said is conversations. If you are just implementers and you just talk to yourselves and you're researchers and you just talk to yourselves, then where is this mixing going to happen? You've got to be, I mean, (a) you've got to really like to chat, so you'll talk to anybody. But I think that, it's because academics is often getting a more and more specialized field, the possibility of having conversations across different, I mean, contexts and sectors, I think is really important. [inaudible 00:53:02] our place is where such things can happen, and all at different levels.

[00:53:30] When you're at a very high-level university, you may be having it with sort of high-level policy makers. I think that this ability to talk about problems, to think about curiosity, to encourage curiosity in schools, I think these are all-important things. If you want to build a culture, which is really together striving to say that, you know, we need to have questions and we need to have methods to answer the questions, and there are people around who can help. You don't have to come up with all the solutions yourself.

Norma Altshuler: Thank you.

Nelly: Hi, I'm Nelly from IPA. Mushfiq, you mentioned that No Lean Season or the encouraging of migration wasn't feasible for Zambia or Malawi. There are alternatives, right? So Kelsey Jack and Gunther Fink looked at consumption loans in Zambia, and while that hasn't yet been scaled up and maybe it won't, it was very effective. How would you recommend that governments looking at these different alternative interventions and possibly wanting to test them in their own context, decide what might be the best fit for them, based on what you've learned already?

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Mushfiq Mobarak: Great. Great question, and I'll go back to principles, okay? The set of results I talked about led to this puzzle, why weren't people going already. That helped me understand, okay, so then I wrote down a model, that I won't present right now, on, okay, what model of human behavior can rationalize all these things that we're seeing, that seem puzzling to us at first glance? From that, the principles we were able to draw out are, look, people seem to be not migrating because it's too risky for them to do it, especially when they are very close to subsistence, their family is under the threat of famine and hunger. Then if they spend their last \$12 on a bus ticket and go to the city and return home empty-handed, then that can have devastating consequences. They weren't taking advantage of the upside opportunity because they couldn't manage the downside risk.

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[00:55:30] The principle that that tells me is, look, if we have a location that's very poor, but that's just an hour or two from the city, that's not a place we should work. The reason is, people can, it might not be very risky there, or if it is risky, people can learn for themselves. They could go to the city, try it out, if it didn't work, they'd just come back the same night. Whereas what this program was doing, it was insuring the travel of people who couldn't otherwise manage the risk.

The other issue that we learned is, okay, of course, for this program to be applicable, we need to see seasonality, that there has to be more volatility in the rural area than in the urban area, not just average income differences, that's another principle. We should also look for countries where cities have vibrant labor markets.

Karen Levy: Thriving cities, yeah.

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Mushfiq Mobarak: Right? In Malawi, that just wasn't true. The way that we have been communicating with government to help them understand, okay, should you be thinking about this program or not? We wrote up a four-page brief, and for a higher level of government, who don't have time for a four-page brief, we wrote up a one-page brief. And said, okay, here are the types of locations we're looking for. Here's how it works. Then you can decide for yourself, okay, within that country, in what district does this seem relevant, in what district it's not relevant

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Norma Altshuler: We can, let's see if there's one more question, and if not ... Take it away, Karen.

Karen Levy: Thanks. I'd actually like to add to that, because I think that here in these two examples, there are two different but both potentially equally successful models using evidence to scale programs and to find impact. What Mushfiq is talking about with No Lean Season, we think we have a product that might work in areas with certain conditions, and so we're going to look for areas that have those conditions.
[00:57:00] Right? Turns out that wasn't the case in Malawi, for various reasons, but it might be the case in other places. Whereas with the Teaching the Right Level model, what was held constant there in the case of Zambia was a really deep and very successful set of relationships with the government.

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There were a number of different potential implementation models, if I understand correctly, and you guys worked with the government there to find the one that would work for them. Right? You could say, well, the problem is seasonality and we have a couple different ways to address seasonality, and so we're going to work with a particular location and find the one that works there. I'm not sure we have that yet. Right? Like we're not there yet. We don't have a menu of options for dealing with seasonality to pull out and say, "Okay, this one didn't work in Malawi, maybe this other one will."

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I think these two different approaches, having a recipe or a tool or a product, and then finding places that it works is one way to do it. I think school-based deworming is another example of that, okay? I mean, my hope is that No Lean Season will be. But that also an equally valid and important approach is, when you have deep relationships and you can sit down, shoulder to shoulder, look at a problem together, have a series of evidence-based solutions, like Teaching at the Right Level and the number of models that that entails and find the right one for that context.

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Rukmini Banerj: Just to give another example. I think we see two things that have worked. One is that you understand there's a problem, and you're looking for a solution and you accept that there is a big literature out there which says that there is a solution. Then when you're getting ready to implement, then come a lot of nuts and bolts questions. To handle those we've seen two things that are very helpful. In the Teaching at the Right Level in India, we work in two ways. One is we actually have, you may call them laboratories or demonstration sites around the country. Our direct programs, where we are involved directly in showing what can happen, is there in every state, because our languages are different, so it may work in Hindi, but it may not work in Urdu, that kind of thing. There we do something like, almost three or 400,000 kids annually, because we think that size of laboratory is necessary to convince the size of India that this can be done.

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In the case of, for example, Zambia, we found that their visiting India helped, not because they're going to take away exactly what is going on here, but to look at the processes more closely, to see a live example. I think that the experience and the evidence, both going well together, and thinking that each can feed into the other is I think really useful.

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Norma Altshuler: Thanks, Rukmini. I'm afraid we are out of time, but this has been such rich discussion. Will you join me in giving our panelists a round of applause?