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Using evidence for public policy gains traction in India

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Hindustan Times



Ford Foundation International Professor of Economics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and J-PAL director Dr Abhijit Banerjee. This year, its regional arm, J-PAL South Asia, is celebrating its 10th anniversary. (Sanchit Khanna/HT PHOTO)

In the last decade or so, evidence-based policymaking has gained traction in India, with some governments showing interest in using scientific evidence to devise policies. One of the advocates of evidence-based policymaking is the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL (<https://www.povertyactionlab.org/>)), a centre at the Department of Economics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The lab, which was established in 2003 by professors Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Sendhil

Mullainathan, uses randomised evaluations (similar to clinical trials used in medicine) to test the effectiveness of social programmes and policies aimed at reducing poverty. This year, its regional arm, J-PAL South Asia (<https://www.povertyactionlab.org/south-asia>), is celebrating its 10th anniversary.

“Decision-making is always evidence-based. It’s not that we came up with the idea, claiming that would be presumptuous and false,” Dr Banerjee said in an interview to HT recently. “The issue is being more sensitised to the quality of evidence. Achieving that quality is not academic fantasy; it is possible to do it in ongoing projects, generate evidence and use that to make policies”. A randomised evaluation measures a programme’s effectiveness typically by comparing outcomes of those (individuals, communities, schools, etc) who received the programme against those who did not.

J-PAL South Asia has over 170 on-going or completed evaluations in India in partnership with NGOs, 16 states and several central ministries. A few completed and on-going projects across J-PAL’s eight research themes include: Early childhood education, skilling, and non-communicable diseases, and direct benefit transfers, data analytics using administrative data, gender and crime.

Co-Founder of J-Pal Dr Abhijit Banerjee Elaborates on the Importance of Evidence-Based Policy Making



While evidence-based policy making may seem to be a rational path for governments to take, convincing bureaucrats and politicians is not always an easy job. “People say that it years to answer a question. Or, it’s too complicated and that there is enough evidence for making policies. I wouldn’t say any of them are unreasonable. People have to take decisions; the political process doesn’t stop for evidence,” Dr Banerjee explained.

Speaking to HT on randomised evaluations and whether they can be dovetailed into policymaking, former Delhi chief secretary Shailaja Chandra said: “Research of this kind is useful if one wants to look at the cost-effectiveness of strategies they can’t become the foundation of policymaking in India”. This is because there are so many variables that need to be taken into account while formulating a policy, evidence of cost-effectiveness is just one of them. A bureaucrat has to take into account the time needed to implement the goals that are set out in a party manifesto or as announced at a political

platform, the available budget and public demand. “The political executive in the states is seldom driven by policy goals, which has a long gestation period and there is little appetite for building evidence of cost-effectiveness or of local relevance once something is viewed as worthwhile - judged by the public barometer,” she added.

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For example, everyone knows six AIIMS-type hospitals will not improve our health indicators, which are a result of a host of socio-cultural factors, low funding etc. But the tendency to spend on health infrastructure will always take precedence over primary health and no amount of data/research-backed evidence will alter a preference for projects and programmes, which are visible and can translate into demonstrable outcomes.

Oxfam India’s chief executive officer Nisha Agarwal doesn’t negate the importance of evidence in policymaking, but argued that bureaucrats must not over other kinds of “real evidence” that comes from “jan sunwais”. “Participatory policymaking is also another way of collecting evidence and making sure that the people for whom you are making these policies have a say in decisions that will affect their lives,” she added.

The only Indian state that has decided to incorporate randomised evaluations into their policy processes is Tamil Nadu. It has created a space within its planning ministry to interact with organisations such as J-PAL. With other states, J-PAL mostly has project-based relations. “But we would like to expand those one-off relationships to more broad-based ones where the government appreciates that we could contribute not just to one policy, but also to the design of welfare policies,” said Dr Banerjee.

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