

Convening Recap: A Conversation On Jobs And Opportunity

February 24, 2023; London, United Kingdom

Led by the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) with support from Google.org, the event brought together leading researchers and partner organizations to discuss priorities, challenges, and open questions about how to best foster economic opportunity in lower and middle-income countries (L&MICs).

(Morning Session #1) Fostering Jobs and Opportunity: Emerging Trends and Insights

Marianne Bertrand (University of Chicago) and **David Atkin** (MIT) opened the event by exploring why fostering jobs and opportunity is critical to reducing global poverty and how researchers, policymakers, and practitioners are addressing global labor market challenges. Marianne discussed how J-PAL's [Jobs and Opportunity Initiative \(JOI\)](#) funds randomized evaluations of innovative strategies to improve employment outcomes. The group then specifically discussed lending to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and microfinance. A participant noted that there is debate surrounding whether lending to SMEs is an effective growth strategy. The group was interested in evidence on what does or does not work to identify and help high-growth potential entrepreneurs. Many randomized evaluations are currently trying to answer these questions. Speakers noted evidence from various countries, stressing that a country's industrial policy can impact lending, growth, and job creation. The group was also interested in hearing more about training and job referrals for remote workers, especially for populations like refugees or women. The session ended with a discussion about green jobs and the future of work. Participants shared that we still don't have good evidence on the environmental impact tradeoffs between smaller, greener firms compared to larger, more productive firms that tend to use more energy.

(Morning Session #2) Researcher Panel and Discussion

The day continued with a series of brief presentations and a discussion featuring three researchers whose work has been funded by JOI: **Edward Asiedu** (University of Ghana Business School), **Kate Orkin** (University of Oxford), and **Robin Burgess** (London School of Economics). Following the presentations, participants voiced interest in the cost-effectiveness of a vocational training program in Uganda whose results exceeded the cost of the program over time. Participants also discussed how many job seekers in sub-Saharan Africa value public sector jobs. In Ghana, many highly educated job seekers emigrate, and it would be valuable to support them to stay and create high-quality jobs. Facing quality constraints for job candidates, private sector companies may tend to create a glut of low-quality, low-skill jobs. Participants also discussed the importance of formal vs. informal enterprises in creating high-value jobs and ensuring quality training (i.e. government support for training may be easier when firms are formal). It may be interesting to explore whether giving entrepreneurs investment-readiness certificates would increase banks' willingness to lend to them.

(Afternoon Session #1) Supporting Locally-Grouped Research in Brazil

Edivaldo Constantino (J-PAL Latin America and the Caribbean) shared about the [Jobs and Opportunity Initiative Brazil \(JOI Brazil\)](#). JOI Brazil's unique [social incubation model](#) actively seeks out

and provides technical assistance for Brazilian organizations in the economic-opportunity space, facilitating partnerships between these organizations and researchers in the J-PAL network.

(Afternoon Session #2) African Scholars Spotlight

Clare Hofmeyr (J-PAL Africa) introduced JOI's [African Scholars Program \(ASP\)](#) and its role in supporting local academics on the continent. The session proceeded to a Q&A discussion with Edward Asiedu and **Nkechi Owoo** (University of Ghana), both JOI-funded African Scholars. The panelists shared about their current work and mentioned that J-PAL should continue expanding its research network to underserved groups like female economists and consider creating more funding windows for African researchers beyond pilots and exploratory grants. Mentorship from another researcher helped thinking about how to grow a randomized evaluation from a pilot to a larger project. There was discussion around the importance of local context and prioritizing research from those who best understand the problems afflicting people in that context. Participants asked if and how the University of Ghana is incorporating impact evaluations into their teaching curriculums. Teaching about randomized evaluations at the PhD level has generated a lot of interest, and these researchers are including several graduate students in their research. Heavy teaching commitments limit the time Africa-based academics can devote to research. The discussion concluded by examining how the researchers interact with policymakers in Ghana—one researcher mentioned a healthy and open relationship between policymakers and economists at the University of Ghana in particular. Financial support for publication, research, and conference activities was mentioned as a promising opportunity for future investment.

(Afternoon Session #3) Investing in Economic Opportunity: A Discussion

This roundtable discussion began with brief presentations from several participants about their organizations' priority strategies for economic inclusion and jobs in L&MIC contexts. There was a clear shared desire to foster better employment outcomes for women in particular. Several participants focused on the importance of SMEs in fostering economic growth, as well as the importance of green jobs and livelihoods of the future. The session subsequently opened into an all-group discussion about common obstacles, the value of research and data, and ideas for collaboration. Three themes emerged:

- A need to bridge the academic/practitioner divide and strengthen evidence use and adoption via better engagement and representation of practitioners and partner organizations—as well as the need to invest in researchers and institutions closer to practitioners on the ground.
- A desire for more actionable, accessible, and digestible synthesis products. Participants cited difficulty in using existing research findings when thinking about how to best approach a new program or what methods to incorporate in interventions. Creating more accessible off-the-shelf research synthesis is key to ensuring future research and policy impact, as well as better communicating existing resources. Supporting this communications work is promising.
- A shared desire for more robust cost-effectiveness data. Participants cited the need to better understand how jobs-and-opportunity programs are implemented and are actually changing lives on the ground, both through better descriptive statistics and via tracking cost-effectiveness of interventions—there was shared enthusiasm for future investment in cost-effectiveness work.