Collaborative Analysis of Labor Intervention Effectiveness

An innovative collaboration between policymakers and researchers grapples with the pressing issue of unemployment.

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Evidence in Practice

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Evidence in Practice

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The Evidence In Practice research project at the Yale School of Management, funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, was conducted from January 2016 to January 2018 in order to better understand the conditions under which rigorous evidence can be effectively integrated into public policies and non-governmental organization (NGO) practices in the field of international development.

The Evidence in Practice project followed a rigorous methodology comprised of three broad elements: First we conducted an initial round of expert interviews with individuals who have spent a significant portion of their professional lives attempting, researching, or promoting the integration of evidence into development practice, including academics, government officials, foundation program officers, NGO practitioners, and think-tank directors. Second, we conducted a matched comparison of eight cases of development programs or interventions where rigorous evidence was integrated with varying degrees of effectiveness. This case study is one of the eight produced by the project. The third component, conducted in parallel to the eight case studies, consisted of interviews with prototypical representatives of each of the stakeholder groups, or individuals who could clearly describe the typical experience of enacting a particular stakeholder role. Our synthesis analysis is presented in the accompanying report.¹

**Stakeholder Characterization**

Based on our research, we have found it useful to think of the flow of evidence into policy and practice as an “ecosystem” in which a set of archetypical stakeholder groups interact. This set of stakeholder categories was described and reinforced by our interviewees throughout the project. While this is not a perfect description (e.g., some organizations fall within more than one stakeholder group and individuals often shift across stakeholder groups or play roles that effectively span categories), it can help frame the conversation to identify the critical roles, incentives, and relationships that animate the complex relationship between “evidence” and “practice.” These representative stakeholder groups are: Researchers, Funders, Influencers², Intermediaries, Policymakers, Implementers, and Beneficiaries³.

Each of the cases thus contains a map of the specific organizations (and individuals) that defined its evolution, their structural affiliation to a stakeholder category (in some cases, organizations played more than one formal, structural role), the informal roles that certain individual actors played, as well as the key relationships between these individuals and organizations.

¹ Please see the appendix for a detailed description on Data and Methods.

² While some of our interviewees identified “Influencers” (such as the media, the general public, lobbyists, and influential individuals) as playing an important role in the evidence-to-practice eco-system, this group did not play an explicit role in the narrative of any of the case studies. So we have included the category here, though it does not appear in the stakeholder maps of the individual case studies.

³ We use the term “beneficiaries” to indicate those whom a specific policy or program is intended to help. Different analytic frameworks use various terms to describe this group, including clients, users, recipients, etc.
Part I: The CALIE Story

Unemployment is a critical political issue in South Africa. The unemployment rate in the country is extremely high at 26%. Youth unemployment (ages 18 to 35) is particularly dire at 37%. In particular, black South African women suffer from higher unemployment rates than black men, despite being more educated on average. Public officials, politicians, and organizations working to improve the economic and social environment in South Africa are eager to identify cost-effective ways to address unemployment, particularly among black women and youths.

The Department of Labor (DoL) is a key government unit responsible for ensuring that the labor market functions appropriately and is specifically tasked to reduce unemployment. One of the DoL’s unemployment reduction programs, offered through labor centers in each province, provides counseling services to job seekers, seeks to match labor market supply with demand by connecting the unemployed with companies and organizations offering positions. While there had previously been efforts within the DoL to gather national-level data about the labor force, there had been no systematic follow-up data collected on job seekers after their contact with career counselors at the provincial level.

Background on J-PAL

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) is an internationally-known organization that aims to “reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is informed by scientific evidence.” The organization opened an office focused on research and policy in Africa in August 2010 at the Southern Africa Labor and Development Research Institute (SALDRU) at the University of Cape Town (UCT), with funding from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and other donors.

Because J-PAL has received stable, unrestricted funding from core donors (on top of its more variable, project-related funding), it has been able to spend some of its resources in a flexible manner that can be responsive to the policymaking environment. J-PAL has used this funding to form strong relationships with the government of South Africa through workshops and other networking/knowledge sharing events, which facilitated the creation and development of the labor policy project described in this case study. J-PAL also benefits from a longstanding relationship between SALDRU, UCT, and government entities in South Africa. The relationships between J-PAL and other stakeholders are described in more detail in this case.

J-PAL Africa is structured into two main verticals—research and policy. The research team typically focuses on partnering with academic researchers to conduct studies, while the policy team focuses both on disseminating research emerging from the network to inform government and NGO partners who can implement the research findings and on assisting these partners with implementation and scale-up.

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In contrast to this typical bifurcation of research vs. policy in J-PAL Africa’s organizational structure, policy outreach in the context of the project described in this case was largely undertaken by the project’s principal investigators and J-PAL Africa’s research team. The large amount of time and effort spent on policy work is also unusual for most projects in academia broadly. This is worth noting because such exceptional dedication to policy as well as research is one of the key factors that enabled evidence from the labor study to inform policies and practices at the DoL.

**Launching the Labor Study**

In January 2011—shortly after its inception—J-PAL Africa organized a workshop to share its mission with South African stakeholders and facilitate exchanges of ideas. A number of prominent policymakers, including Trevor Manuel, the former finance minister and then head of the National Planning Commission of South Africa (NPC), were in attendance. Manuel knew Abhijit Banerjee, co-founder of J-PAL, from a previous Harvard-led research initiative on economic development policy in South Africa around 2006 to 2008.

At the workshop, Manuel was able to further develop his relationship with Banerjee, leading to a new partnership between the NPC and J-PAL, formalized as the Collaborative Analysis of Labor Intervention Effectiveness (CALIE). In order to address one of the NPC’s key mandates—the issue of youth unemployment—J-PAL Africa raised funds and began to seek proposals for grants for projects related to labor policy. It was formally promoted as a joint research program between the NPC and J-PAL Africa designed to develop and implement rigorous impact evaluations of youth employment policy interventions. CALIE’s ultimate goal was to identify initiatives that lead to positive outcomes, help inform policy decisions, and reduce unemployment.

In preparation of the workshop, the principal investigators and the J-PAL Africa research team surveyed studies on unemployment within and outside of South Africa. This included data that found that firms typically look to their social networks to fill job vacancies. As a result, otherwise qualified applicants with weak social networks were disadvantaged, particularly if they were female (Schöer & Leibbrandt, 2004; Magruder, 2010). The principal investigators also reviewed academic papers focused on interventions designed to reduce the gap between intention and behavior in the health sector. These interventions included writing action plans, sending reminders to participants, and providing peer support. The research team sought to test the effectiveness of these mechanisms in the context of the labor market.

Eight months later, in August 2011, CALIE hosted a workshop (funded and run by J-PAL) focused on generating new research ideas on labor policy in South Africa. The workshop attendees included several international researchers (including Abhijit Banerjee), local researchers, and NPC members. The goal of the workshop was to link South African
researchers with international academics who sought to work on similar research topics. It culminated in a document to solicit research proposals focused on reducing the South African unemployment rate. This document was later emailed to various high-caliber economics programs at several of the country’s leading universities.

At the same time, Martin Abel—then Research Manager at J-PAL Africa and now a recent PhD graduate in Public Policy from Harvard University—led outreach presentations and workshops at universities in the Western Cape outlining J-PAL’s mission, partnership model, and working methods—with an emphasis on the benefits of randomized controlled trials.

J-PAL’s promotion efforts led sixteen academic teams to submit research proposals, including one from Professors Patrizio Piraino (from the University of Cape Town, or UCT) and Rulof Burger (from Stellenbosch University). The two professors, who went on to become the principal investigators of the project, had previously met through academic networking events and were interested in working with J-PAL because of its reputation and funding opportunities. They also shared a personal desire and sense of responsibility to work on the topic of unemployment in South Africa.

This motivation was enhanced by UCT’s faculty evaluation criteria, which explicitly assessed the “social responsiveness” of an academic’s research, which encouraged faculty to engage in socially relevant work. One professor stated that he “can only imagine doing work that may end up being useful for the government.”

CALIE approved Piraino and Burger’s preliminary research proposal, along with seven others, in December of 2011 and provided a USD$10,000 grant from J-PAL Africa. In January CALIE hosted a workshop with all the accepted research proposal teams in order to provide feedback on the research questions and identify potential government partners. J-PAL Africa acted as an intermediary, using its strong relationships with government officials to connect Patrizio Piraino and Rulof Burger with the relevant people at the DoL to get the project off the ground. Given how unemployment was (and still is) such a crucial political issue in South Africa, the DoL was eager to explore alternative solutions and welcomed the research collaboration.

The two professors, J-PAL Africa, and the DoL worked together to implement the first pilot study at the Sandton regional Labor Center. J-PAL Africa provided funding for
This collaborative design process was crucial to the success of the project because it enabled the researchers to explicitly design the study to fit within the Department of Labor’s resource limitations, incentive structure, and existing work flow.

Implementation, research assistants, and support managing the project’s budget and logistics. J-PAL Africa’s Martin Abel eventually left his position at J-PAL to begin his PhD at Harvard and was brought on to the team as a co-principal investigator.

Research Questions + Pilot Project
The research proposal sought to determine whether a “skills signaling” intervention could help disadvantaged and low-income job seekers overcome a lack of credibility that other job candidates with “credible signals”—such as a university degree or the right social network—might have.

Labor center career counselors regularly ran workshops aimed at job seekers, in line with their mission and the DoL guidelines. These workshops covered how to write CVs, networking skills, job applications, and other topics. For the pilot study, the principal investigators worked with J-PAL Africa and the DoL to design a workshop session on reference letters (in which they were able to collect rigorous data about their usefulness), and which the career counselors then added to the workshops at the Sandton Labor Center.

The principal investigators led the process to design and evaluate the interventions, but would regularly meet with J-PAL Africa and the DoL to incorporate feedback and comments on their proposed design. While there was no formal name for this coalition, stakeholders credit Martin Abel for spearheading the meeting schedule, and acting as an intermediary. They also credited Laura Poswell, the executive director of J-PAL Africa, for driving the collaborative effort with the DoL by sharing information with the principal investigators when they were unable to be present for the joint meetings. Additionally, the research assistants who worked with the principal investigators conducted focus groups with the DoL in order to determine what intervention should be the focus of the research question. These focus groups led to the reference letters being added to the project.

This collaborative design process was crucial to the success of the project because it enabled the researchers to explicitly design the study to fit within the DoL’s resource limitations, incentive structure, and the existing work flow of labor center employees. By designing the project in this way, the researchers tried to ensure a smooth implementation for the DoL that, if successful, could easily be scaled. For example, the researchers learned that, for the project to scale, its costs would have to fall within the existing DoL budget. They also
identified career counselors as a lynchpin of the intervention, so they structured the project to fit within the scope of the counselors’ current performance metric of serving a certain number of job seekers each quarter—because labor center employees could use the intervention to better meet their performance goals, they had an incentive to support the project.

The DoL also hoped to leverage the project to access data on job seekers, given its own data collection limitations. Some employees stated that “there’s no tool or measurement in place that can actually measure the value of the career counselors or the career counseling that takes place” and that the DoL would “love to have more information … to say it does have an impact, especially in the area of [job] placement.” Career counselors in particular expressed a strong desire for more data on the effectiveness of their services, such as information on job seekers’ employment status after the career counseling sessions. There were a few minor disagreements in these discussions. Some government staff were concerned that the reference letters would not be helpful to those job seekers with a shorter job history. Additionally, there was some discussion over which interventions to include (e.g. reference letters versus the impact of counseling sessions generally). Although J-PAL Africa and the principal investigators had to adjust their research focus slightly to get the government to support the project, they saw these compromises as critical in order to ensure that the research question was relevant and timely for the DoL, and to establish a relationship of trust that would allow for more ambitious and extensive research in the future. In the pilot implementation, the career counselors would teach a group of workshop attendees about the potential benefits of using a reference letter, and provide reference letter templates to be completed by former employers. Career counselors would also teach the same workshop without the reference letter component in order to create a control group. Counselors and J-PAL Africa jointly accepted the filled-out reference letters. Then the J-PAL Africa research team applied each month to open positions on behalf of the work-seekers, using an experimental approach that varied reference letter inclusion. This variation helped to further test the effectiveness of the letters.

All of the participants felt positively about the design process and repeatedly described it as “very cooperative.” Everyone felt their suggestions were incorporated fairly. One of the principal investigators attributed this cooperative experience to the “shared interest in trying to meet the urgent demands this country has. […] When you operate in an environment where the real questions are not only interesting academically, but they’re also urgent politically and socially, then it’s easier not to have conflicts... This project was the best-case scenario interaction between
government and academia because they were interested in our results, [and] they also informed what we were doing... There was a lot of input from the government.” The DoL staff reiterated this shared personal interest; when asked about her motivation to work with the researchers, a career counselor said, “[I see] people on a day-to-day basis who are really struggling and needing intervention and needing tools to get somewhere... I think [the intervention] was quite a good initiative and very practical.”

The initial results from the pilot study were positive, indicating that job-seekers who sent out reference letters with their CVs had a higher call-back rate than job-seekers who did not send out reference letters. The pilot also showed that an intervention of this type could be woven into the existing operations of the labor centers at basically zero added cost. However, the pilot did not show whether the intervention could operate at the scale needed to have a real impact in the labor market. Thus, the principal investigators and J-PAL Africa decided to apply for funding to scale-up the research project.

**Larger Scale Impact Evaluation**

The researchers and the DoL collaborated to determine how best to evaluate the intervention on a major scale, given funding constraints. The team scaled up the number of labor centers involved from one to four. Based on requests from DoL staff, the team also increased the scope of the study from just the impact of reference letters, to the impact of two interventions: (1) reference letters and (2) action plans—a template in which individuals would work with counselors to map out next steps for the job search, which could help job seekers increase the number and quality of job applications.

As in the pilot study, all participants had a positive and cooperative experience. The design process was similar to that for the pilot project: all stakeholders held regular meetings with each other to ensure their voices were heard, and the principal investigators incorporated suggestions into the design. To complement these ongoing meetings, there were two workshops with the DoL and career counselors to get their feedback on the design and to talk about the results.

The team applied for and received funding from two sources to enable this larger scale evaluation. The first, Programme to Support Pro-poor Policy Development Phase II (PSPPD II)—a joint program between the European Union and the Presidency of South Africa—had a call for research proposals focused specifically on reducing poverty and inequality. The second funding source was the World Bank Gender Innovation Lab which had a call for research proposals for projects focused on gender. In 2014, the project received funding from PSPPD II to run a full-scale, four-site randomized controlled trial. In 2015, the team received additional funding for the project from the World Bank Gender Innovation Lab. Overall, funding from these two sources totaled about USD$250,000.
In the 2015 implementation of the project, the four labor centers were: Soweto, Krugersdorp, and Polokwane, in addition to Sandton. They chose these labor centers based on conversations with the DoL. The criteria were which centers would be easiest to work with, given office logistics, location, and number of registered job-seekers. Offices in prime locations with a large number of job-seekers would make it easier for the researchers to obtain a larger sample size. Selection also took account of the DoL’s interest in working with job seekers in different kinds of geographic areas (the Polokwane labor center was specifically included on this basis). The DoL also provided access to a database of people who had signed up for job counseling services, which the researchers used to invite job seekers to the labor centers.

**Reference Letters**

The reference letter component of the full-scale evaluation was an extension of the pilot, with the scale was expanded to test more participants. The study demonstrated that reference letters helped job seekers progress in their search to find employment, showing a 60% increase in callbacks. Employers found the reference letters a credible signal of the workers’ skills. The study also showed that women were, on average, more diligent about taking the reference letter templates to their former employers and following the process through to completion, which could partly explain why the reference letters especially improved callbacks for women by 89%.

**Action Plan**

For the action plan component, the project evaluated four interventions. Each intervention was a combination of one or more of the following: the action plan itself (i.e. weekly goals and a plan to achieve those goals), a job counseling workshop, peer support (i.e. the research team would send a message to a friend of the job seeker describing the latter’s goal), and reminders.

In total, the study worked with a sample of about 1,100 registered job seekers. These job seekers were primarily unemployed, age 18 to 35, who were actively searching for jobs but with low intensity (on average, 4 applications per month, with 8 hours of job searching spent per week). They were all black South Africans, and evenly split between males and females. The research team collected data from several phone surveys and tracked the number of applications submitted, hours searched, employment status over time, and other metrics.
The study found that, although the action plan had no effect on the number of hours spent searching for a job, it significantly increased the number of job applications submitted (by 15%) and the number of job offers (by 30%). It increased the effects of normal counseling sessions by helping job seekers follow through with their goals. The reminders and peer support interventions were found not to be effective.

The research project concluded in June 2016, and the principal investigators and J-PAL Africa shared their findings with the DoL and regional career service coordinators through a workshop in October 2016. The research team and J-PAL Africa also held debriefing meetings for the career counselors to share their findings and answer questions about the process.

The DoL was particularly pleased with the results because the intervention did not require additional resources beyond the time of the career counselors, and it fit within the career counselors’ existing incentives (i.e. the intervention enabled career counselors to achieve their goal of seeing a certain number of job seekers each week). Additionally, the DoL was “quite happy... that the results are something that can be implemented” and are easily actionable (as opposed to showing how a certain intervention may not lead to an expected outcome). This was beneficial from a morale perspective because the DoL had research findings that it could act on. While it is useful that the research showed that two of the interventions had no effect, the DoL interviewees stated this finding alone would not have generated much enthusiasm because it would have left the DoL with the same low placement rate and without any significant action items. One interviewee stated that when this happens, it is “quite difficult then because [the stakeholders] have gone through this whole process... but then the end result isn’t something that you can clearly put forward” and implement.

The research paper was finalized in November 2016. Many of the interviewees noted that the project’s turnaround time was incredibly short, just 16 months from the start of the scaled-up project to the finalization of the paper. One J-PAL Africa employee stated that he had “never seen that on any other project.” This quick turnaround can be attributed to several factors: unemployment was, and is, an extremely pressing issue in South Africa, causing the DoL to be extremely supportive and responsive; Martin Abel wanted to use the project as his job-market paper in time for his graduation from Harvard; and there was strong buy-in for the project from all stakeholders at every level.

When pressed to describe any challenges faced over the course of the project, all stakeholders had only positive comments, reiterating that the project went smoothly and was cooperative. While there may have been minor disagreements about how best to design the project, all interviewees described such disagreements as discussions rather than conflicts. One important thing to note is that the study was always referred to as a DoL project, as opposed to a J-PAL one, in order to ensure that the Government of South Africa was located at the center of a project in which it was not only a key stakeholder, but whose engagement would be essential for following through on expanding implementation based on positive outcomes.

As of the time of publication of this case study, J-PAL Africa, the PIs, and the DoL are discussing an expanded roll-out of related policies and practices based the results of the project, with new plans expected in early 2018.
Part II: **Key Themes + Insights**

This section discusses the Evidence in Practice themes as they pertain to CALIE and summarizes key insights and implications for thinking about the translation of evidence to policy and practice more generally.

**Incentives**

Throughout the ecosystem, within and across stakeholder groups, formal and informal incentive structures are frequently not conducive—and are often in contradiction—to the integration of evidence into practice. Typically, organizational incentives are defined around an insular view of the organization (e.g., academics publish in academic journals, policymakers must exercise their budgets according to program and budgetary rules, NGOs must operationalize their programs as stated in their budgets and proposals to funders). Usually, these organizational incentives have no mandate or room for the explicit search of external evidence, much less for the generation of internal evidence that would then lead to continuous adaptation of programs and policies as new learning emerges.

Shedding light on the incentives of each stakeholder provides a clearer understanding of what mechanisms can be changed in order to facilitate the translation of evidence into policy and practice. In the CALIE case, the incentives of all the main stakeholders were aligned such that everyone could work towards the same goal, facilitating the success of the project.

**Definition of Evidence**

There are varying definitions and understandings of what constitutes “evidence,” dependent especially on the perspectives of each stakeholder group. For example, the framing, language, and limited accessibility of academic evidence can render it less useful to other stakeholders. These diverging views of evidence create barriers across stakeholder groups, as what constitutes valid evidence for each exists in different realms and in different forms that are challenging to reconcile.

Broadly speaking, J-PAL defines evidence as impact measures coming from randomized controlled trial evaluations, but recognizes that this definition may be narrower than that used by other stakeholders, especially policymakers and development professionals.

In the context of this case study, all participants agreed about the validity of the research study. Generally, there was agreement both on the project design and implementation. Although J-PAL Africa and the principal investigators had to alter the research design slightly to get the DoL onboard, the changes were relatively minor and, from the perspective of the researchers, worthwhile in order to lay down a positive foundation for a long-term working relationship with the government. Furthermore, researchers also offered to collect and analyze data that was not strictly necessary for their research, but that was extremely valuable for their government partners, both because it would inform their work and because it would be collected with the project’s—and not the government’s—resources. This also helped to foster a positive, long-term working relationship.
Researcher Incentives

In the context of this case study, interviewees stated that the researchers were very involved in the projects on the ground and with disseminating their work after the study was completed. It is interesting to note that the policy team at J-PAL Africa did not work on this. All policy-related outreach was conducted by the principal investigators and the J-PAL research team. Many interviewees stated that this amount of dedication to policy and implementation considerations is unusual to see among researchers. This dedication can be attributed to several incentives.

Firstly, while this degree of attention to policy and implementation considerations is atypical among most academic researchers, J-PAL Africa’s research team and the principal investigators saw themselves as the group best placed to work with the government policymakers and implementers. This kind of engagement is part of J-PAL’s stated mission. Once the dissemination and scale-up design phase is complete, J-PAL Africa plans to have a policy team member work closely with the Department of Labour on the next phase of the project, assisting in the rolling out the intervention.

Secondly, the incentives of the academic sector in South Africa are structured to promote projects that have a social benefit. South African academic institutions explicitly evaluate professors not only based on research, teaching, and administrative commitments, but also on social responsiveness. It is an important, structurally embedded way that the university encourages academics to conduct rigorous research that is socially relevant. The principal investigators involved in this study stated that their home universities evaluate them partially based on this metric, though there is some degree of self-selection, and they preferred to work in a university setting where social responsiveness is a priority.

Thirdly, personal motivations played a large role. The researchers emphasized that they felt a responsibility to “make a difference” on pressing issues because of the high poverty and unemployment in South Africa. The principal investigators involved committed above-ordinary resources and time to work on the policy aspect of the pilot study, given their personal commitment to the underlying issues. Stakeholders from all organizations (other researchers, the DoL, J-PAL Africa staff) mentioned several times that this level of effort on policy is very unusual for most researchers.

Another incentive for the researchers’ interest in policy engagement was their desire to build a strong relationship with the DoL in order to conduct more research in the future. Policy-related data in South Africa is not always publicly available due to a lack of systematically-collected data and a lack of electronic infrastructure to publish data online. By forming a good relationship with the DoL, the researchers could build a relationship that would allow them to work on future projects that could both increase the utility of existing internal DoL data and generate new data from scratch. When asked about why the researchers conducted more policy advocacy work than usual, a J-PAL Africa employee explained: “I think what’s interesting in that case is also the fact that a lot of them are local
Another incentive for the researchers’ interest in policy engagement was their desire to build a strong relationship with the Department of Labor in order to conduct more research in the future.

Implementer Incentives

The project was explicitly designed to be implemented by the DoL and to work within the existing incentive structure and work flow of labor center employees. Labor center employees were not resistant to working on it because the project enabled the employees to better achieve the targets on which they were assessed, specifically, the number of job seekers they work with each quarter. Labor center staff have high targets in terms of the number of job seekers they need to counsel per year (upwards of 1,800), with the definition of “counseling” including one-on-one consultations, workshops, and other group activities. A DoL employee said: “we’ve got certain indicators that we [measure] on job seeker registration, career counseling, placements, and so on. There is a target and then there’s a target for each official. Each official has to do X number a quarter or annually. That is basically what you get measured on... how performance is evaluated at this stage within the department.”

Counselors expressed a strong desire for feedback on their services—updates and information on job seekers’ employment status after the career counseling they received. Another important part of the pilot study’s appeal was the inclusion of a feedback loop through which the researchers shared the results of the research with DoL and the labor center staff who participated in the study. Interviewed government staff said they were willing to work with the researchers because it would help them have more data on impact and quality (rather than only quantity) of services that they would not otherwise be able to collect. One J-PAL Africa employee stated: “The counselors, all of them in fact, … were very committed to helping people so that was what I heard from the PIs that we were very lucky in that regard that it’s not always the case with government or with any other organization that you have people who want the research project to go smoothly so that we can get the results and then from there figure out how to make things better.”

South Africans or have a strong link here... So there [are] probably two reasons why they are so involved... The local link, and the fact that they were involved with the DoL from the very beginning... There’s been a continuous relationship and I think they want to continue having that relationship probably for other research projects that they do later.”

Additionally, the pilot study was the basis for Martin Abel’s PhD job-market paper and therefore had a great influence on his future professional prospects. As a result, he had a particularly strong incentive for the pilot study to be conducted rigorously, quickly, and ideally make a significant policy impact.
Intermediaries

The role of intermediaries is crucial to consider, as intermediaries are the actors that connect and facilitate communication between evidence generators and practitioners. Although intermediaries may not be the most visible participants when considering evidence and practice, many of our sources have explicitly or implicitly referred to intermediaries when citing examples of successful evidence-to-practice flows.

J-PAL Africa was cited by many interviewees as the key intermediary (“the glue”) that helped connect the researchers, the government, and other stakeholders. J-PAL Africa created the set of conferences and convenings where people across sectors could meet and learn of each other’s problems, methods, and ideas. They also provided three key resources: funding for the pilot project, administrative/logistical/budgetary support, and assistance connecting the principal investigators researchers with the government. In particular, J-PAL Africa had strong connections with the government, which attracted researchers to partner with it to run studies and communicate findings. Findings were disseminated through meetings, workshops, or other avenues where the government was a direct partner. As one principal investigator said: “J-PAL is also very good at engaging with policymakers.... It identified key people in the department who we could approach for this idea ...”

Another level of intermediation is embedded within J-PAL Africa’s structure itself. Because J-PAL Africa is physically housed at the University of Cape Town with the Southern Africa Labor and Development Research Unit (SALDRU), it benefited from informal linkages, notably existing connections between SALDRU and government officials.

Timing

The different and often discordant timeframes within which researchers, policymakers, and implementers operate often hobble efforts to coordinate, let alone collaborate, on evidence-informed approaches. Electoral cycles and political windows differ from NGO funding cycles and from academic publishing rhythms. Yet each actor is bound by the timeframes of her formal stakeholder group.

The CALIE project was carefully and strategically timed, enhancing its chances of success.

J-PAL Africa strategically chose to work on this labor-related project because the government would be more responsive, since unemployment was a politically critical issue in South Africa. As a result, the government was keen to work with the researchers in a timely way.

Additionally, there was strong buy-in from each of the stakeholders at every level. The researchers had a strong relationship with the DoL, and the DoL had buy-in at both a high level (heads of the provincial labor centers) and on the ground (career counselors). This buy-in was created through a lot of hard work by the researchers to be good working partners and through the
strategic design of the research project. The strong buy-in, coupled with a push from the principal investigators, created a positive feedback cycle, expediting the timing of the research project even more. By pushing hard to carry out the project in a timely way, the researchers increased the likelihood that key people from the DoL would still be in their positions, so the main decision-makers from the DoL on implementation were those who had worked directly on the project and it was “fresh on their mind.” The researchers followed through with feedback for all stakeholders by holding debriefing presentations for the career counselors to share their findings and answer questions about the process, further increasing buy-in and expediting further scaling.

Capacity and Resources

Few organizations provide incentives or carve out explicit time for managers to explore emerging evidence in their field. Even fewer assign staff to find relevant evidence and translate it into accessible formats for the organization. As a result, the role of preparing and sharing evidence that is timely, useful, and relevant for practitioners is sometimes explicitly played by formal intermediaries (e.g., certain think-tanks). More frequently, an actor who holds a formal role within another stakeholder group spontaneously takes on the (additional) responsibility for trying to integrate evidence, with no actor formally responsible for the process. Discovering and integrating evidence requires time, energy and funding.

In this case study, the researchers and the DoL had the necessary capacity and resources to work effectively together to design and implement the project with a focus on generating the evidence needed to evaluate and refine the intervention. J-PAL had received steady funding, which had the flexibility to enable the organization to be responsive in how it invested its time and money. As a result, J-PAL Africa could afford to spend time forming strong relationships with the government, as well as underwrite research proposals explicitly aimed at addressing pressing policy concerns. Additionally, the DoL was excited about the project because the intervention responded to the self-identified priorities of the government, making use of existing public resources for implementation.

Trust and Convening Power

The cross-stakeholder collaborations required for evidence-informed policies and practices are often difficult to initiate, develop, and sustain. Particularly when institutional incentives are lacking, personal trust, respect, and buy-in between individuals across stakeholder groups become critical to fostering the effective flow of evidence into practice.

If practitioners trust that the evidence generated is accurate and relevant to their needs, translation of that evidence is far more likely to be prioritized.
J-PAL's global reputation made it very easy for J-PAL Africa to gain access to the government in order to launch and coordinate the project. An employee stated: "As J-PAL, ... you can literally practically email anybody and they'll see you and you won't have to wait. It's very interesting... I think J-PAL just has built this unbelievable global brand name." On the ground, they also have strong personal relationships with officials within the government which they'd started building at their inception. J-PAL explicitly invested time and resources to cultivate and maintain these relationships in South Africa (thanks, in part, to its flexible funding, as previously described). Labor center staff said they enjoyed their partnership with the researchers and perceived them as "easy to work with," in large part thanks to J-PAL Africa’s operational support on the ground and the respect they showed to government staff in the design and implementation of, as well as the follow-up communication about, the results of the program.

Additionally, J-PAL Africa was careful to refer to the reference letter study as a DoL project, as opposed to a J-PAL one, ensuring the Government of South Africa was correctly seen as the central stakeholder in the project and could receive the main credit for the project. As a result, there was little competition for visibility between the government and the researchers. A J-PAL Africa employee said: "When you talk to the department and say... That's a J-PAL project—it's completely not the framing we use because it isn’t. It's the labor centers' and... their reference letters and their action plans...I know that maybe it's more just a semantic thing, but we're very careful when we frame these things."

**Learning From Failure**

*Potential consequences for risk-taking and experimentation with innovative approaches are generally seen as negative and dissuade the exploration of novel, evidence-informed interventions. Fear of failure can further hinder the incorporation of novel evidence into practice, even when stakeholders recognize the value and applicability of the evidence.*

In the context of the CALIE project, all stakeholders were aligned in the goal of generating a positive impact on job-seekers. Nonetheless, all stakeholders understood that if the intervention had no impact on job-seeker results, it did not necessarily mean the project was a failure. Thanks to the co-design process, all stakeholders arrived at a shared goal of running the project smoothly in order to collect accurate data in order to
assess job-seeker outcomes. Fortunately, the project not only collected accurate data but also indicated the intervention had a positive impact on job-seeker outcomes.

Our sources did not explicitly describe how they would have responded had the project’s hoped-for outcomes not been achieved. However, an indication that the stakeholders would have “learned” had the project been deemed a “failure” is that the funding to disseminate results for this project was not dependent on its success. J-PAL Africa’s steady, unrestricted funding meant that results would be communicated – and that continued engagement with the DoL was not premised on the achievement of positive outcomes.

**Conclusion**
CALIE illustrates how the stakeholders approached the project as a collaboration in service of exploring a shared problem: what kinds of interventions might help address the high employment in the country? Key players within CALIE worked extensively to find an alignment in both institutional and personal incentives across stakeholder groups so they all shared a common goal. This shared objective guided the process of project design, implementation, evaluation, and follow-up. All stakeholders also shared a commitment to learning from the project and to disseminating that learning.

Stakeholders also recognized what each had to offer one another. For example, researchers were extremely interested in the government data that the DoL had access to, a trove of long-term value to the researchers (and at no cost to the government). And J-PAL was more than willing to give credit for any success to where it would prove most useful: the government. These kinds of “negotiated exchange rates” can help bring disparate stakeholders together in exploration of a shared problem.

By identifying these key themes, this case study hopes to show that the lessons of CALIE’s success can be adapted to other evidence-informed collaborations by other organizations.
**Stakeholder Map**

This stakeholder map is a visual representation of the major stakeholders involved with this project. The importance of each of the actors is defined by their relative size, and their proximity to the center of the project. Their role is defined by the color; multiple colors indicate multiple roles. Primary relationships, denoted by solid lines, indicate the most directly significant relationships while secondary relationships, denoted by dashed lines, indicate indirect, but influential relationships. Actors not connected by lines are still involved with the project, but less directly.
### Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>J-PAL Africa launched</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>CALIE launched</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Request for proposals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Pilot development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>PSPPDII funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>WB general lab funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Work begins at labor centers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Last calls with job seekers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Pilot results shared</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Sandtown
- **PILOT**
  - Research workshop
  - Research proposals
  - Proposal workshop
  - Pilot results shared

#### RCT
- **PILOT**
  - Evidence generated by the project
  - Evidence from outside the project is being incorporated

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**Contents**
- Stakeholder Map
- Timeline
- Process Diagram
- Appendices
- Print

**Full Report Summary + Findings**
- View Alphabetically
- View Geographically
- View by Discipline

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**Case Studies**
- View Alphabetically
- View Geographically
- View by Discipline
National adoption to reach **scale** is planned for 2018.

**Process Diagram**

- **National program**
  - [planned for 2018]
  - **ADOPTION**
  - **(SCALE)**

- **Informal social networks**
  - limit hiring
  - **PROBLEM FRAMING**

- **Signal skills references**
  - **SOLUTION FRAMING**
  - Make action plan and signal skills references

- **Employment workshops**
  - **PILOT**

- **Revised employment workshops**
  - **PILOT**

- **Project analysis**
  - **EVALUATION**
The research design for the Evidence in Practice project consisted of three broad components. First, we conducted expert interviews (31) with individuals who had spent a significant portion of their professional lives attempting, researching, or promoting the integration of evidence into development practice.\textsuperscript{A1} This included academics, government officials, foundation program officers, NGO practitioners, and think-tank directors. To identify these experts, we first contacted individuals who had either published extensively and prominently on the topic or who had actively funded research or programs with the explicit goal of integrating evidence into practice. From this first set of experts we conducted snowball sampling until we reached a saturation point.\textsuperscript{A2} This initial set of interviews informed and directed the next two components, as they resulted in an initial map of the relevant stakeholders in the “evidence-to-practice ecosystem” and the hypothesized and actual paths that seemed to link them together.

Second, we conducted a matched comparison of eight cases of development programs or interventions where rigorous evidence was integrated with varying degrees of effectiveness. These cases were matched on structural, geographic, and programmatic characteristics—as well as on the extent to which evidence had informed practices—to better identify the critical factors that allowed actors in certain cases, and not others, to integrate rigorous evidence into practice.\textsuperscript{A3} This matching process led us to identify pairs of cases across four different countries, leveraging temporal and cross-sectional variation between them as seen in table A2.

\textsuperscript{A1} By development practice, we mean the work of government actors, NGOs, and others who are responsible for designing and executing development projects and programs.

\textsuperscript{A2} Data saturation is difficult to define and is dependent on the field of study. In this case, we defined saturation as the moment when, in a sequence of several expert interviews, no interviewee gave us information that we had not encountered before.

For each case, we first identified, through existing literature and interviews with subject experts, a series of key informants who had detailed knowledge of the case’s history and protagonists. These initial interviews with case experts led to the creation of a detailed actor/stakeholder map for each case, where we identified the key stakeholder groups that either participated in or were affected by the program, as well as the specific individuals who played an active role in the program’s evolution. These stakeholder maps were validated with several informants for each of the cases. We then conducted interviews with each of the key individuals across stakeholder groups. Interviewees were asked to relate chronologies of objective events, behaviors, choices at critical junctures, and facts of the processes described. In every instance, the goal was to identify the individuals responsible for the particular evolution of a case, as well as the specific tactics they employed throughout the process, to better understand the rationale behind their decisions as well as the factors that led them to succeed or fail. In total, we conducted 161 interviews across the eight cases. Interviews were complemented with a wealth of archival information including media articles, private documents (donor reports, internal presentations and communications, etc.), and public documents (announcements, academic articles, editorial pieces). These data were used to trace the chronological list of events for the overall development of each case. Each storyline was developed in an extensive document that established the causal links described by the subjects and ensuring a balanced consideration of different stakeholders.

The third component, conducted in parallel to the eight case studies, consisted of interviews with prototypical representatives of each of the stakeholder groups, or individuals who would clearly describe the typical experience of enacting a particular stakeholder role. Using the stakeholder map and initial hypotheses as starting points, this stage focused on the dynamics that shape the interactions between stakeholder categories. The work consisted of 34 in-depth interviews with representative actors from each stakeholder group. The interviews focused on each individual’s needs, assumptions, operational constraints, main concerns, professional and ideological backgrounds, timelines, and aspirations—especially concerning the development, dissemination, and use of novel evidence in development practice. This in-depth analysis resulted in a more nuanced and detailed stakeholder and system map that more clearly identified both breakdown points and paths of connection that hinder and facilitate the exchange of knowledge and information across stakeholder groups, as well as a refined

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Table A1. Expert Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1: February 2015 – May 2016</th>
<th>Researchers</th>
<th>Funders</th>
<th>Intermediaries</th>
<th>Policymakers</th>
<th>Implementers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 2: September 2016 – June 2017</th>
<th>Researchers</th>
<th>Funders</th>
<th>Intermediaries</th>
<th>Policymakers</th>
<th>Implementers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table A2: Case Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country/Program</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Dates of Intervention</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
<th>Primary Stakeholders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>South Africa</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Analysis of Labor Intervention Effectiveness</td>
<td>Employment program introducing new elements to vocational training</td>
<td>2011 – 2016</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Government, Researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUEL: Feed, Uplift, Educate, Love</td>
<td>School nutrition program</td>
<td>2007 – present</td>
<td></td>
<td>NGO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ghana</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Community Assistant Initiative</td>
<td>Remedial education program for primary school children in reading and math through teaching assistants from local communities</td>
<td>2010 – 2013</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Researchers, Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduating the Ultra Poor</td>
<td>Poverty alleviation program integrating elements of social protection, livelihoods development, and financial services</td>
<td>2010 – 2013</td>
<td></td>
<td>Researchers, NGO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>India</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching at the Right Level</td>
<td>Remedial education program for primary school children in reading and math</td>
<td>2001 – present</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>NGO, Researchers, Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQUA+</td>
<td>Water purification drops for retail sale</td>
<td>2010 – present</td>
<td></td>
<td>NGO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mexico</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progresa</td>
<td>Oportunidades</td>
<td>Poverty alleviation program using conditional cash transfers</td>
<td>1997 – present</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programa Primer Empleo</td>
<td>Employment program using government incentives for the private sector</td>
<td>2007 – 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
set of hypotheses about the breakdown of communication and about possible interventions to solve it.

Across the three components, we conducted a total of 226 interviews. All interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, with an average length of around 90 minutes (minimum of 60, maximum of over 120). Around two-thirds of them were done in person and the rest were conducted remotely. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. Each of the 226 interview transcripts was coded extensively to identify first-order concepts related to the integration of evidence into development practice. First-order concepts include “concerns about reputation” or “short-term decision-making”. This required multiple readings of interview transcripts, field notes, and archival data to associate nearly every passage of text with one or more codes. These codes were then grouped into second-order themes, always contrasting them with current research on the integration of evidence into practice. Second order themes included “incentive structures” or “timing misalignments”, each of which was developed extensively in a memo that explored the characteristics, tensions, and contradictions of each theme. In stage three, we mapped the codes to each of our case narratives to detect patterns of activities, constraints, and decisions that defined the evolution of each case at critical junctures. This allowed us to identify similarities and discrepancies across cases, as well as to create comparable counterfactuals that could account for differing outcomes.

In stage four, we created process maps, concept maps, data tables, and detailed case synopses that linked key challenges, events, and decisions to the specific alternative tactics employed by actors and then to their subsequent consequences for the development program or intervention in question. This final set of analyses revealed a somewhat consistent set of factors faced at comparable stages by actors across our different settings. Throughout our analysis, we iterated between emerging insights, existing theory, and matched comparisons across cases to identify the mechanisms that operated at critical junctures.

It is worth mentioning that, at two moments of the project (the first after our first set of expert interviews was over and the second after the completion of our initial case narratives) we hosted a workshop with two different groups of highly experienced representatives from each of the stakeholder groups. During these workshops, we discussed our emerging findings and we gathered additional, essential insights from participants. The workshops served to validate and deepen our understanding of emerging insights.


A8 We ensured consistency in coding across the different cases and authors through several mechanisms, including: a) a selection of interviews was coded by two or more coders, after which they reviewed discrepancies and agreed on their resolution, b) a common project book where all the codes were collectively kept, aggregated, and analyzed, c) a weekly meeting to review coding process and to develop a joint coding standard, d) memos were developed jointly, with contribution from and verification by the different team members, among others. Access here.