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MENA NEWSLETTER
October 2024



Photo credits: The Sawiris Foundation for Social Development, Mina Balkhoun, and J-PAL

As J-PAL MENA continues to expand its efforts in advancing evidence-based policymaking, we are excited to share highlights from our diverse initiatives over the past two quarters in this edition of our newsletter.

ON THE HORIZON

- Takeaways from the recently hosted *Jobs for Development Conference*
- J-PAL MENA is set to participate in the *World Urban Forum Conference*
- Debuting the advanced edition of our flagship *Evaluating Social Programs* course
- The official launch of the *Hub of Advanced Policy Innovation for the Environment (HAPIE)*

We look forward to sharing updates and insights from these initiatives. In the meantime, catch up on our latest news below.

LATEST RESEARCH FINDINGS

Breaking Poverty Cycles in Upper Egypt

Research by: Ragui Assaad, Adam Osman, William Pariente, and Christine Valente.

The Bab Amal program is helping ultra-poor families in Assiut and Sohag achieve sustainable livelihoods. Inspired by BRAC's [Graduation approach](#), the intervention offers comprehensive support designed to combat the root causes of poverty, including financial literacy training, cash transfers, an income-generating asset, and more.

Researchers evaluated this approach in Upper Egypt with 3,465 ultra-poor households and included some of the households in a low-cost version of the intervention where they received half the support. New results found that the half-cost version brought meaningful benefits in food security and women's empowerment. Meanwhile, households in the full-cost program quadrupled their livestock value and saw significant boosts in income and consumption over 40 months.

[Read more details about the intervention »](#)

EVENTS AND MILESTONES



South-South Learning participants. Photo credit: J-PAL

The South-South Learning Journey (SSL)

J-PAL MENA's [Egypt Impact Lab \(EIL\)](#), in collaboration with J-PAL MENA, J-PAL Global, and J-PAL [Southeast Asia](#) hosted a five-day series of knowledge exchange workshops and capacity-building meetings from the 27th to the 30th of May in Jakarta, Indonesia. It featured engagements between key government representatives from Egypt and Indonesia, who identified existing best practices and evidence-informed solutions in strengthening social protection programs as well as policy challenges. The learning journey was supported by the [Islamic Development Bank](#) and [Community Jameel](#).

To learn more about key takeaways from the SSL journey, [read our latest blog](#) »

Webinar Series with the World Bank on Gender Evidence from MENA

J-PAL MENA has partnered with the World Bank's [Middle East and North Africa Gender Innovation Lab \(MNAGIL\)](#) office to highlight key findings from the growing body of evidence from randomized evaluations on gender issues in MENA. J-PAL affiliated professor [Bruno Crépon](#) (ENSEA; Scientific Director, J-PAL MENA) presented evidence on [changing gender norms](#) and women's improved access to markets and [advancing agency and empowerment](#) of girls and women in MENA.

Global Evidence for Egypt Spotlight (GE4E) Seminar Series: Digital Learning

On June 12-13, 2024, J-PAL MENA and UNICEF Egypt co-hosted the eighth "GE4E" Seminar Series, focusing on digital learning. The event featured a closed-door session and seminar discussing the latest evidence on integrating technology into teaching. J-PAL invited researcher [Andreas de Barros](#) (UC Irvine) shared insights from randomized evaluations, covering cases where technology did not improve learning outcomes, analyzing the most cost-effective ed-tech interventions, and more. The evidence was presented to education practitioners and a diverse policy audience in a panel at AUC Tahrir Campus the next day. Panel speakers included Ahmed Daher, Deputy Minister for Technological Development; Shiraz Chakera, Chief of Education for UNICEF Egypt; and Hend Gelgel, Egypt's Go-To-Market Consultant at the Wadhvani Foundation.

[View the live stream recording and resources for previous GE4E events](#) »



Photo credit: Mina Balkhoun, Tale Tellers

Expanding J-PAL MENA's Portofolio: The Humanitarian Sector

J-PAL MENA and J-PAL Europe, in collaboration with Innovations for Poverty Action, delivered a Humanitarian Action Research Incubator in July at the American University in Cairo. This three-day workshop targeted organizations working in the humanitarian sector in the MENA region and taught participants how to design randomized evaluations in their program areas. The event also marked the launch of the Humanitarian Portfolio at J-PAL MENA, with support from Community Jameel, to foster research partnerships within Egypt and MENA.

Read our blog on [evidence-based humanitarian action in MENA](#) »

STRENGTHENING THE CULTURE OF EVIDENCE-INFORMED DECISION MAKING



Photo credit: J-PAL

The Evaluating Social Programs (ESP) course in Rabat, Morocco

From July 3rd to 5th, professionals from across Morocco attended a three-day training on Evaluation Social Programs at the University Mohammed VI Polytechnique (UM6P) Campus in Rabat. Organized by the [Morocco Innovation and Evaluation Lab \(MEL\)](#) with UM6P, J-PAL, the Harvard Center for International Development, and Community Jameel, the training engaged forty participants from non-profit organizations, public institutions, and international organizations. They explored randomized evaluations, designing and implementation considerations, and how results can inform policy. Highlights included a networking session, to discuss potential research projects with researchers and a session on how to form research partnerships.

[Learn more about MEL's ESP training »](#)

Collaborating with Influential Policy Makers

J-PAL MENA's [EIL](#) organized two “Leading for Evidence-Informed Decision-making” roundtable events with the [Central Bank of Egypt](#) and members of [Entelaq](#) holding. Practical examples of randomized evaluations within the Firms and Finance Sectors were presented, along with insights from government officials on the importance of championing evidence generation and utilization.

On the education front, under EIL and in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Technical Education (MoETE), German Development Cooperation (GIZ), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), J-PAL MENA hosted a kick-off

workshop for the Technical Education Reform Strategy (TE 2.0) that aims to develop and launch a nationwide teacher survey to later inform randomized impact evaluations. Subsequently, a skills training program on data collection and quality assurance was conducted with USAID support.

To learn more about how J-PAL MENA collaborates with MoETE to foster an iterative evidence-generation process that informs the government's education policies, read Adam Osman (University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign; Scientific Director, J-PAL MENA), Arwa Adel, and Nayera Adly's latest blog on [building the foundation for robust vocational education RCTs in Egypt](#).

Empowering Future Local Researchers Across Generations

In August, the [MENA Scholars Fellowship](#) selected its second cohort, consisting of six researchers from the region. This comprehensive fellowship aims to strengthen the skills of emerging researchers in designing and conducting randomized evaluations of poverty reduction and development programs. J-PAL MENA also connected with 150+ undergraduate students from universities across Egypt through outreach sessions and a webinar, reaching Cairo University, Helwan University, Assiut University, The American University in Cairo, and The British University in Cairo.

We're expanding our academic outreach efforts, so if your academic institution is interested in collaborating, please reach out to satallah@povertyactionlab.org.

NEWS FROM THE FIELD



Photo credit: J-PAL

Rethinking Micro-Financing for Egyptian Firms

Research by: Adam Osman, Jules Gazeaud, Natalia Rigol, and Benjamin N. Roth

J-PAL affiliated researchers are partnering with the [Sawiris Foundation for Social Development](#), the Center of Egyptian Family Development in Luxor, and the Family and Environment Development Association in Qena to conduct a randomized evaluation on financing for firm. The evaluation explores whether flexible micro-financing terms are more effective than traditional models for firm growth in Egypt. By addressing key constraints in

microcredit products, the research aims to identify the most impactful financial products for firms' growth and entrepreneurs' well-being.

At the other end of the spectrum of financial tools, our latest briefcase publication, [now available in Arabic](#), explores the impact of providing significantly large loans to small business owners.



Photo credit: Shutterstock.com

Rebranding Work as Volunteering to Boost Female Employment in Egypt

Research by: [Brian Feld](#), [Marieke Kleemans](#), and [Abdelrahman Nagy](#)

How do social norms impact female labor force participation? Researchers randomly offer two groups of women identical work as either "volunteers" or "employees." By changing the framing, researchers explore how decisions to work are impacted. The recruitment process also involves household members to examine social dynamics that might affect women's ability and willingness to work. This study is conducted with support from the [Sawiris Foundation for Social Development](#) and implemented by [Life Makers Foundation](#).



Photo credit: The National Council for Women

Empowering Rural Women through Digital Savings and Lending Associations

Research by: [Jason Kerwin](#), [Alfredo Burlando](#), [Reham Rizk](#), and [Sarah Wahby](#)

The 'Tahweesha' program by the National Council for Women (NCW) forms savings groups of 10-30 women using the 'Meeza' prepaid card and the "Tahweesha" app. Partners include NCW, the Central Bank of Egypt, UNWomen, the European Union, and the Dutch Embassy. EIL and J-PAL conducted a randomized pilot study on digital savings groups' impact on rural women's

livelihoods in Egypt, with a baseline survey delivered in summer 2024 and a training manual covering financial management skills being delivered to villages.



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Launching the Education Sector's First Regional Pilot Evaluation

Research by: [Todd Pugatch](#) and Anett John

Researchers are testing the impact of the innovative "IQRA" model on first-grade students' Arabic literacy skills in public and private schools in the UAE. The model is developed by Al Qasimi Foundation in Ras Al Khaimah, UAE. Baseline data collection will start in September 2024.



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Empowering Small Businesses through Digital Marketing

Research by: [Adam Osman](#) and David McKenzie

J-PAL affiliated professors, with local partners and the support of the [World Bank](#), are evaluating whether providing training, assistance, and financial incentives can boost small enterprises' adoption of digital marketing practices and its effect on growth, customer base, and overall profitability. This project is an initiative to foster digital inclusion and economic empowerment for small business owners nationwide.

FUNDING OPPORTUNITY

Khalifa International Award for Early Learning

This award recognizes outstanding research and programs in education for children from birth to 8 years old worldwide. The objectives of the Khalifa Award align closely with many of our partner programs and the evaluations we support, making them strong contenders for this honor. We encourage our partners and other organizations with rigorous evaluations to apply. The application process is straightforward, and in addition to the \$50,000 prize, it offers an excellent opportunity for dissemination. [Learn more »](#)

TEAM SPOTLIGHT



Amira El-Shal

Associate Director of Research
J-PAL Middle East and North Africa

Meet the Associate Director of Research at J-PAL MENA, [Amira El-Shal](#), who assumed her role in April 2024! Amira brings extensive experience in microeconomics. Her latest co-authored book, "[The Political Economy of Crisis Management and Reform in Egypt](#)", was published in August 2024.

A snapshot of her latest publications covers export trade channels, financing in primary health care, and the indirect impact of health disasters on maternal and child mortality. [Read Amira's publications »](#)

Amira is also an Assistant Professor of Economics at Cairo University's Faculty of Economics and Political Science and an Economic Research Forum Affiliate. She has held positions at the World Bank, African Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Office of the Economic Affairs Advisor to the President of Egypt, and Egypt's Ministry of Investment and International Cooperation.



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