Innovations for Poverty Action

Authors
Kerry Brennan

Researchers
Leigh Linden
University of Texas

Edward Miguel
University of California, Berkeley
Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA)

Michael Kremer
The University of Chicago

Esther Duflo
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Rema Hanna
Harvard University

When low-tech is highly successful

It is a difficult and not particularly fruitful debate when different sectors important to economic development are pitted against one another in the quest for donor attention. Lasting development progress usually encompasses many areas, and debates that fail to recognize this are often just distracting. Some of the more interesting (and no less heated) debates are waged once a specific sector of focus or growth constraint has been identified.

For example, once we have decided that education is crucial, how do we act upon this decision? Should we hire more teachers? Are extra textbooks an effective additional school input? Should we divide students by ability? What about providing scholarships? Given funding limits, decisions on resource allocation are unavoidable. In the past couple of years, the One Laptop Per Child Campaign (OLPC) has added to the mix its own question: Will providing children in developing countries with laptops help them learn and increase their intellectual curiosity?

Tim Ogden, a friend of IPA and frequent collaborator, writes in an article for Miller-McCune, "*There's no question that the idea of One Laptop per Child is appealing. It has whiz-bang technology, support from the glitterati of Silicon Valley and the World Economic Forum, and emotional resonance - giving poor children something we all know and value - on its side.*"

The problem, he points out, is that the evidence on the impact of technology such as the OLPC on educational outcomes is thin. (IPA Research Affiliate Leigh Linden evaluates two programs here and here.) There is strong evidence, however, for the relatively low-cost effectiveness of a number of other interventions aimed at education in the developing world. These include the mass de-worming that is the object of the Deworm the World Initiative (based on a study by IPA Research Affiliates Michael Kremer and Edward Miguel), and the monitoring of teacher attendance via cameras in rural India, a project by Research Affiliate Esther Duflo.

Innovations for Poverty Action

September 11, 2009