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Field Experiments in Development Economics¹

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Abstract

There is a long tradition in development economics of collecting original data to test specific hypotheses. Over the last 10 years, this tradition has merged with an expertise in setting up randomized field experiments, resulting in an increasingly large number of studies where an original experiment has been set up to test economic theories and hypotheses. This paper extracts some substantive and methodological lessons from such studies in three domains: incentives, social learning, and time-inconsistent preferences. The paper argues that we need both to continue testing existing theories and to start thinking of how the theories may be adapted to make sense of the field experiment results, many of which are starting to challenge them. This new framework could then guide a new round of experiments.

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