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No Lean Season: Encouraging Seasonal Migration to Address Income Insecurity

Three hundred million of the world's rural poor suffer from seasonal income insecurity, which often occurs between planting and harvest when the demand for agricultural labor falls and the price of food rises. Those who undergo a lean season typically miss meals for a two- to three-month period. This is especially problematic for pregnant women and young children since poor nutrition for even a short time can limit long-term cognitive and physical development. Seasonal hunger and deprivation is perhaps the biggest challenge to the reduction of global poverty that has remained largely under the radar.

Members of some families in poor rural areas migrate to urban areas for work to cope with seasonal deprivation. In Bangladesh, however, researchers observed that many vulnerable households, who could potentially reap large benefits from temporary migration, didn’t send anyone away to work, thereby risking hunger. Why weren’t more people migrating? Would these households improve food security if they were to send a migrant to these areas during the lean season? More broadly, why were so many people sticking around in relatively unproductive rural areas, in the face of persistent gaps in wages and productivity between urban and rural areas? Was this akin to the proverbial $100 bills being left on the sidewalk?

A research team from Yale University, the London School of Economics, the University of Sydney, and Innovations for Poverty Action investigated these questions in Northern Bangladesh during 2008-2011, testing whether providing information or small financial incentives, worth about the cost of a bus ticket, increased migration and in turn, improved household welfare. They found that households offered either a grant or loan to migrate were substantially more likely to send someone to work outside the village during the lean season, and those families increased caloric intake relative to those not offered the incentives. Many of those households chose to re-migrate on their own a year later. A replication and expansion of the study during 2014-2016 not only confirmed these findings, it also showed that larger scale emigration increases wages and work hours in the village of origin, indirectly benefiting other residents who stay back.

Read about Evidence Action's scale-up of the program here.

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