

# The battle against PRIVATION

Poverty eradication researchers awarded the Nobel Prize in economics



USA. Abhijit Banerjee hails from India, Esther Duflo grew up in France, and Michael Kremer was born and brought up in the USA and finished his undergraduate and graduate degrees at Harvard. Their research focuses on poverty alleviation, and more specifically on the design of policy to guide development

THE 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics was awarded to a trio who came from three different continents to teach and work together in Cambridge, Policymakers often search for the “silver bullet” to eliminate poverty. All three Nobel Laureates challenge the notion that there is a “miracle cure” for poverty. It is safe to assert now that studies and scientific research make it abundantly clear that poverty elimination is a complex and trial-and-error process. We tried the Grameen model of microcredit, but 30 years of experience shows that while credit does help, its role in eliminating extreme poverty is very limited. Studies conducted in many countries including Bangladesh have frequently questioned the marginal beneficiary effect of this programme on poverty. Banerjee and Duflo established MIT’s Poverty Action Lab which through its research in six countries

effects of policy actions such as cash subsidies, food programmes, or better teachers. What makes RCT so important? We have a number of competing programmes vying for our limited resources and RCT allows us to identify the most effective bundle that reinforce rather than negate each other. At a celebratory gathering in Cambridge following the Nobel announcement on Monday, Banerjee said, “Twenty years ago, if you told someone in government you were going to do a randomised control trial, they would look at you like you’d just escaped from a mental institution”. To my *Daily Star* readers, the names of Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo ought to ring a bell since in



Nobel winners Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer shown on screen, during a press conference at the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in Stockholm, Sweden, on October 14, 2019. PHOTO: JONATHAN NACKSTRAND/AFP

practitioners and government. All three Nobel winners believe that data and experimentation should guide efforts to ease poverty. “Nobel for Poverty’s Economics” declared a banner in the *New York Times* on October 15, a day after the winners were announced. Banerjee and Duflo have argued in their pioneering book, “Poverty Economics” that so much of anti-poverty policy has failed over the years because of an inadequate understanding of poverty. The battle against poverty can be won, but it will take patience, careful thinking and a willingness to learn from evidence. Kremer, Banerjee, and Duflo have devoted almost two decades in “developing new ways to study—and help—the world’s poor.” Their meticulous work in experimental economics offers transformative potential for poor people anywhere and is a vital guide to policymakers, philanthropists, activists and anyone else who cares about building a world without poverty.

first raised the alarm, and their results indicate that “microcredit has failed to meet its expectations.” Kremer has independently discovered that interventions to address problems like education deficiencies and child health have a high cost-benefit ratio. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences appeared to be gushing with excitement, so to speak when they announced that, “In just two decades, their new experiment-based approach has transformed development economics, which is now a flourishing field”. I will be remiss if I do not mention the two principles that these three practitioners of economics have popularised in their search for new options to fight poverty. First, all potential and promising actions must be assessed for efficacy before they are mass-produced or “replicated.” Secondly, Poverty Lab and its followers have relied on a statistical method known as randomised control trials (RCT) to identify and isolate the poverty reduction

the past many of my op-ed essays touched upon their work. In “More poverty action labs needed” (June 14, 2011) and “Why poverty action plans don’t work” (April 26, 2017), the ideas propagated by the Poverty Lab and its affiliated researchers were discussed. The timing of this year’s awards and the Nobel Committee’s choice will undoubtedly reinvigorate the search for cost-effective interventions to reach the SDG targets. I will mention one area where the work of the three Nobel Laureates will be helpful for Bangladesh, primary education. In Kenya, an experiment with groups of Kenyan schoolchildren found that access to extra textbooks did not improve most student outcomes. Further research showed that the true impediment was teaching methods that were insufficiently tailored to student needs. Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and works in information technology. He is Senior Research Fellow, International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), a think-tank in Boston, USA.

# In pursuit of a hunger-free world

MD ARIF HOSSAIN THOUGH yesterday was World Food Day, it should have been called World Hunger Day, as it was established to bring global attention to the problem of food insecurity. Hunger is a bigger problem than most of us realise, affecting about 795 million people around the world, including some 40 million in Bangladesh. In other words, one in nine people on the planet do not eat enough food to lead a healthy, productive life. The issue is especially pronounced in developing nations, where nearly 13 percent of the population face food insecurity. As I watch my own son grow up healthy and strong, I am very grateful that my wife and I have been able to provide him with sufficient food. But too many children in our beautiful country suffer the pangs of hunger on a daily basis. We must do all we can to right that wrong. The effects of chronic hunger go far beyond the pains of an empty stomach. Studies show that physical growth and mental development are stunted in infants and children who do not get sufficient nutrition. That means a hungry childhood can negatively impact a person’s entire life. Similarly, pregnant women who do not get enough good food tend to deliver babies that are smaller and prone to health problems and developmental delays. Women also suffer disproportionately from hunger because they are more likely than men to sacrifice meals when there is insufficient food and children to be fed. Of course, it’s not only necessary to provide people with more food, but healthy, nutritious food that provides enough calories, protein, vitamins and minerals. There is also a problem with “hidden hunger,” which is due to deficiencies of micronutrients like iodine and zinc and essential vitamins. This can affect even wealthy households with sufficient food. We can take pride in the tremendous progress we have made in addressing the chronic food shortages that plagued Bangladesh in the 1970s. Since the year 2000, hunger in our country has been cut in half. But with so many millions of our citizens, especially children, still facing acute hunger, much remains to be done. We currently have the highest rate of underweight children in South Asia. Half of all children below the age of 5 are chronically undernourished or stunted, and 14 percent suffer from acute undernutrition, according to the World Food Programme. Providing the people of Bangladesh with sufficient food is a complex problem that is becoming increasingly challenging as we suffer extreme flooding and other effects of climate change. It will take a creative, committed effort to produce more food, reduce food waste, increase incomes and educate people about nutrition—without using more land or creating additional impacts on the environment. Fortunately, we are seeing some bright rays of hope

in regard to food production. This is taking several forms, including achieving higher yields, reducing crop losses and producing more nutritious staple foods, such as rice. What is the source of this hope? Biotechnology. Our scientists from government research institutes are working now to develop local varieties of rice to deliver higher yields and are enriched with essential nutrients, including zinc and vitamin A. They are also developing new varieties of potatoes that can naturally resist the devastation of late blight disease. Farmers currently must apply large amounts of fungicide to control this plant disease, which significantly lowers yields. Pesticide use also can be reduced through the adoption of pest-resistant cotton. We have already seen the great success of our first biotech crop, pest resistant Bt brinjal. Several studies have documented that the farmers who grow these pest-resistant varieties of brinjal achieve higher yields, dramatically curtail their use of pesticides and increase their incomes six-fold. Researchers are now



working to breed other varieties of brinjal with this pest-resistant trait. Though these improved crops offer many benefits, they have been demonised as “GMOs” by those who do not understand the science, deny the need for agricultural innovations and fear biotechnology. However, Bt brinjal has already shown us that these foods are safe to eat and bring farmers many benefits. Bangladesh has led the way in South Asia by being the first to approve a genetically modified food crop. As the government allows farmers to plant more of these improved crops, we can also lead the way in reducing the hunger and poverty that so many of our people suffer from. This year’s World Food Day theme is “Healthy diets for a zero-hunger world.” Biotechnology can help us achieve that goal. Our children are depending on us to make the right choices—choices that will help them lead healthy, productive, hunger-free lives.

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CROSSWORD  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**  
1 Deep sleep  
5 Like fresh lettuce  
10 Tea party guest  
12 Book after Ezekiel  
13 Screen dot  
14 Clickable pictures  
15 Adam’s madam  
16 Movie studio part  
18 Scorching  
20 Is for two  
21 Blown away  
23 Smidgen  
24 Lawn pest  
26 Angers  
28 Capitol Bldg. worker  
29 Sahara sight  
31 List-ending

**DOWN**  
1 Criminal outing  
2 Martini garnish  
3 Not uniform  
4 Great serve  
5 Smart  
6 Paper beats it  
7 Set apart  
8 Ladies of Spain  
9 Stuck

**ABBR.**  
32 Voluptuous  
36 Bric-a-brac holder  
39 Fuss  
40 Buffalo NHLer  
41 Spud  
43 Not rented out  
44 Fixes copy  
45 Quick looks  
46 Mediocre

11 Nudged  
17 Ignored  
19 “2001” computer  
22 Set of chairs and a table  
24 Flammable gas  
25 Like “West-world”  
27 Sheepdog in “Babe”  
28 Finishes  
30 GI-entertaining org.  
33 Cookout spot  
34 Playwright Clifford  
35 Trunk  
37 Hard trip  
38 Brooklyn team  
42 TV spots

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

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SLIT PELTS  
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