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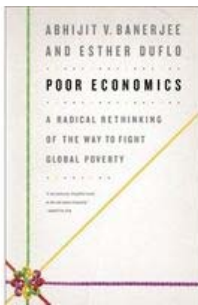


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Global Poverty: A 'Radical Rethinking'

Friday, May 27, 2011

By [Stephen Reader](#)



"Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty" by Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo. ([Amazon](#))

Welcome to *Politics Bites*, where every afternoon at *It's A Free Country*, we bring you the unmissable quotes from the morning's political conversations on WNYC. Today on the Brian Lehrer Show, [Esther Duflo](#), professor of poverty alleviation and development economics at MIT, and [Abhijit Banerjee](#), International Professor of Economics at MIT, authors of *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*, talked about the complicated nature of poverty and how understanding poverty contributes to better policy.

When poverty isn't about food

The subtitle of Duflo and Banerjee's book begins "A Radical Rethinking," and among the first assumptions they say we should rethink is that poverty and starvation are intertwined. They're not, according to Banerjee.

Certainly there are people in the world who are starving, but the average person living under a dollar a day doesn't act as if they're starving. With a little extra money, they don't buy more calories; they might buy more attractive food or a cell phone, but they don't act as if desperate for more calories.

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First, is it true that the decisions the poor make aren't in their interests, and second, should we blame them for it? I take issue with the second; I certainly don't blame the poor.

"-->

— [Abhijit Banerjee](#)

In fact, the destitute probably get too much of just plain calories. It's not always that they don't have access to food; they don't have access to *good* food, the kind that sustains, nourishes, and promotes health. Right now, aid usually comes in the form of grains that don't provide a wide enough variety of nutrients, but Duflo said that technology might offer creative solutions to the problem.

If the problem is more of nutrition and people are lacking in micronutrients—iron, vitamin A, zinc—the right policy might be more to think about how we can make it easier for poor people to get the micronutrients they need. Maybe there are some technological innovations: packing traditional grains with more micronutrients or packing salt with iron, these kinds of things.

Poorly informed

It's not simply lack of access to nutritional food that reinforces poverty: more damning is the lack of access to credible information. Many governments in developing nations don't have a track record of being honest, or taking pains to educate and empower citizens. The poor don't necessarily know what they're being deprived of, and there usually exists no regulatory apparatus to make sure they're getting what they need—thanks to the law, we know that our cereals come fortified with certain necessary nutrients, for example.

Americans have a healthy distrust of government, but the emphasis is on "healthy." It's quite different elsewhere, said Banerjee.

Many of these states have a reputation for saying things which aren't true. They guarantee this and promise that and don't deliver. There's a natural tendency for people then to be skeptical of government assertions about things. There's a need for government to build up credibility as a reliable, non-manipulative deliverer of information.

Banerjee said that undermined any argument about the poor being responsible for their situation.

First, is it true that the decisions the poor make aren't in their interests, and second, should we blame them for it? I take issue with the second; I certainly don't blame the poor. When I take medicine, it's not because I actually understand the biology of the medicine that I take. I have faith in the system that generates and delivers medicines, and I take them. I believe the doctor because the U.S. medical system is pretty well, run and if you were brought up where many things weren't what they're supposed to be, you'd naturally be skeptical. It's not that we are so much smarter, it's just that we live in a better regulated world; that's part of what keeps us safe from lots of stupid ideas.

Business	Food	Brian Lehrer	New Sounds	Book an Event	The Takeaway
Lowered expectations	Teacher	Fishko Files	No Cover: WNYC's	Directions	Radiolab
Health Care	Visual Arts	Fresh Air	Concert Series		Studio 360
Transportation	Another "radical rethinking": we expect too much from the poor. At least in the realm of education, said Dufo. Efforts to provide adequate primary schooling are entirely geared toward social elites, who usually arrive better prepared for a curriculum that proves grueling and unrealistic for the downtrodden.	Leonard Lopate	Soundcheck		On The Media
		Morning Edition	Spinning on Air		Transportation Nation

The curriculum being taught is amazingly demanding and teachers plow through it regardless. Children who arrive without preparation or who are a little younger and maybe the first generation of learners in their family get lost early on and nothing is ever done to try to get them back.

One way to change it is to be a little bit more realistic with the curriculum. The objective of primary school might be that every child should be able to read and count. Focus on the basic; on these bases you'd be able to identify the brightest of kids, then make sure have access to further education. The system in which kids are educated now is a complete illusion, and in some cases a mockery.

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Studio 360
The Takeaway

Comments [6]

Janet Goldner from Manhattan

What I heard on the show was all about **MANAGING** poverty not about alleviating it. And for me the most dangerous way to talk about poverty is to make broad generalizations like Esther made about education. Where, when, who? One solution does not fit all. In public primary schools in Mali there are often 100 students in the class and in university there are 1200-4000 students in the class. And yes, the only way to effectively fight poverty is to transform the international monetary system. I have worked in West Africa for many years.

May. 27 2011 11:11 AM

Score: 0/0

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Susan Burger from Upper West Side

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There are far more effective programs than sending vitamins with those bags of food grains. There are programs that develop the LOCAL institutions with local fortification, local distribution of micronutrients through immunization programs, and gardening programs. The Helen Keller International Program had a marvelous program in Bangladesh whereby they empowered the LOCAL nongovernmental programs to set up programs to train women to improve their gardening programs. Women earned more income, their families ate a richer variety of greens, and they and their children had lower rates of night blindness (a consequences of vitamin A deficiency). I don't know the status of the Africa program now -- Nicholas Kristoff did visit it -- but they were adapting the gardening program to very different conditions in the Sahel. I think these researchers have not spent much time in the field.

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Score: 0/0

Susan E Burger from Upper West Side

The speaker is talking about micronutrients as being crucial. Despite the fact that I actually worked on micronutrient programs from 1985 to 1999, this is not the first most important problem. The first limitation in nutrition has economic roots, but is almost completely ignored by the international development community at the present moment thanks to HIV. The first most important source of micronutrients for infants and young children is their mothers own milk. Despite the fact that we now know that transmission of HIV is just as high among exclusively formula fed babies as exclusively breastfed babies and that it is the babies who are being fed both formula and breastmilk who are at higher risk. In the wake of the HIV epidemic, formula use has spiked, marketing of formula is incredibly deceptive, and as a result EXCLUSIVE breastfeeding rates have plummeted. The Lancet did a metaanalysis of infant death and breastfeeding was at the TOP of the list of interventions that could reduce death rates.

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Score: 0/0

Laurie Spiegel from Chicago

What would it take to send multiple vitamin pills along with those sacks of grain that are always sent as food aid?

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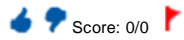
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John Lobell from NYC

The answer is that some people have different CULTURES, but we are not allowed to say that. Look at the attacks on Amazon on the book, Culture Matters.

And we must NEVER suggest that some of these cultures should be changed.

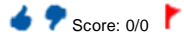
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Frans Verhagen from New York City

Fighting poverty also means transforming the dysfunctional international monetary system with its fluctuating exchange rates, currency manipulation and a costly global reserve system. Ideally, nations should adopt a monetary standard, not based upon gold but on carbon. It should be part of credit-based financial system. Any comments?

May. 27 2011 10:57 AM



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