Ever wonder why some development projects succeed while others fail?

Esther Duflo and her colleagues at MIT’s Poverty Action Lab are working on the answer. Duflo is one of the newest recipients of the MacArthur Genius Grant because of her commitment to investigating what causes poverty to persist in some developing countries and what works to alleviate it.

She does this by setting up controlled field experiments in some of the poorest countries in Africa and South Asia. These experiments set out to prove how social and economic forces fuel the cycle of poverty in these areas. They also test how effective foreign aid projects are at lifting people out of poverty.

Duflo conducts her experiments using a method that mimics how drug companies conduct randomized medical trials. One group participates in a development project while the other does not. The differences between them are then measured to see if the project worked, and exactly how well.

Some of Duflo’s best known work is on HIV prevention in Kenya. Her research shows it’s more effective to teach girls specific ways to reduce their risk — like avoiding sexual relations with older men — than teaching basic medical facts about HIV and emphasizing abstinence as the best method of prevention. As she explains in her recent article for VoxEU.org, girls who were given risk-reduction information now use condoms more often, stay in school longer, and become pregnant less often.

“Economics is about the best way to allocate resources, and finding out what works is important to understanding how to allocate these resources,” Duflo told Philanthropy Action. Too few development strategies are vigorously tested. Proving what works can help.

(For more information on the Poverty Action Lab, check out Sarah Standish’s post "Researching Better Ways to End Poverty.")
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2 of 3 3/9/2010 12:13 PM
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