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Money, methods, and morals: What are development economists up to?

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Abstract

In the highly competitive field of publishing in economics journals, methods often become fads sometimes to the detriment of framing meaningful research agendas and of research ethics. In recent times, empirical work based on primary data collection has gained traction. Randomized controlled trials entail not just primary data collection but also interventions involving human subjects. Field research involving data collection is also expensive, raising a number of concerns. In this special symposium we explore questions of research agendas and research ethics, and argue for the acceptance of broader methodological approaches, greater inclusion in the publication process and for a reflection at the disciplinary level of practices related to field research.

KEYWORDS

development economics, diversity in research, mixed methods, randomized controlled trials, research ethics

1 | INTRODUCTION

The trigger for this special symposium was a submission to the journal of what is now the third last article in this collection. Upon reviewing it, one of the journal editors felt that the concerns raised regarding the current state of development economics were sufficiently widespread to merit a collection of papers around the three themes in the title of this special symposium. Of

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the 11 articles that make up the collection, five are concerned with randomized control trials (RCTs). Four articles highlight the sidelining of qualitative work in economics and an ostensible lack of serious engagement with scholarship from other disciplines. Two contributions investigate whose work gets to be published in development economics. Many of the issues raised here are not new—the discipline has grappled with them for a while (see Khera in this collection and the Symposium on Experimental Approaches in Development and Poverty Alleviation (World Development, Vol. 27, March 2020) but also Barrett & Carter, 2010; Deaton, 2010, 2020; Deaton & Cartwright, 2018; Ravallion, 2020). By putting a collection together, this symposium hopes to energize this important debate by adding new voices and themes.

2 | MONEY

When primary data collection is involved, empirical work in development economics can be expensive. Monetary requirements have consequences for who can do the research, and thus, on several dimensions of diversity. The importance of diversity is now widely acknowledged (Amarante & Zurbrigg), for example, generating new ideas.

The need for big budgets for empirical work has contributed to a predominance of researchers from high-income countries. That in turn tends to relegate local researchers to a secondary position because they do not have direct access to these sources of funding.¹ This is perhaps indicative of high aid dependency, governments paying more attention to foreign donors than local economists. Some have questioned whether donors affect the manner in which results are reported (Doucouliagos et al., 2022).

Within empirical work in economics, RCTs (still very popular) are especially expensive, and are undertaken at the detriment of other survey work. In many cases, we do not know how important a problem is, but we know that we can examine it by applying fashionable techniques for which funding is easier to come by. Thus, money can influence who does the research, what research questions get asked, how (Section 2) it is done and what is reported.

The two articles by Amarante and Zurbrigg and McKay bring evidence on diversity to this collection to highlight the problem of poor representation in development economics and lack of diversity. Both use data on publications, location of authors, acceptance rates, and so forth to shed light on who gets published and where, especially in the field of development economics. Amarante and Zurbrigg analyze data for nearly 20 years (2000–2019) on the top-five (based on the h-5 index of Google Scholar) “economic development” journals. The predominance of authors based in developed countries (70%) is striking. The silver lining is the increase in collaborative teams (from 7% in 2000 to 17% at the end of the period). As compared to “economics journals,” “economic development” journals show a higher share of collaborative or developing country-based authors. In development, non-academic research organizations fare better in publishing collaboratively, perhaps indicating their access to more resources (most of these have more funding than universities based in the Global South).

McKay is the editor of the *Review of Development Economics* (RDE) and he provides a critical self-reflection of the publishing experiences of researchers from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Although the RDE receives the majority of submissions from developing countries (60%) the number of published articles from these countries make up only 33%. Why are so many submissions from LMICs unsuccessful? McKay shows that these submissions are much more likely to fall at the first hurdle of the publication process. Since “desk rejection” is the bigger challenge faced by developing country authors, McKay considers possible reasons

and ways to address this problem. The underlying reason for rejection is that LMICs is often not providing supportive research environments. While unable to address systemic issues, McKay makes a number of specific recommendations how the RDE could support developing country researchers. More generally, he concludes that relevant and rigorous research in development economics is not synonymous with methods requiring large funds, thus the editorial team of the RDE should state more clearly to contributors that papers are neither required to prove causality, nor that the journal is limited to a small set of methodological approaches.

Essentially, while things are beginning to change, there is a long way to go in bringing a fundamental change in how things are being done. This will require concerted effort but as our own experience demonstrates, there are still significant challenges in this process of change. For this special symposium, despite serious attempts, including individual outreach to researchers based outside the “global North,” we neither received contributions from Africa nor on African context. Though a number of prominent RCTs took place in (East-)Africa, ranging from the seminal study by Miguel and Kremer (2004) on the impact of worms on child health in Kenya, to the recent controversial analysis of water services in Nairobi (Coville et al., 2023).

We also know little about the gender balance in development economics but the poor representation of female economists is well known (see especially Lundberg & Stearns, 2019 and data presented in Card et al., 2023).²

3 | METHODS

Some years ago, *The Economist* carried a chart that plots (over time) widely used methodological tools in empirical work in economics. See chart embedded in [this article](#) in *The Economist*. The chart clearly shows how the discipline is susceptible to methodological fads.

Methodological fads in the field have consequences for the quest for knowledge and understanding of the most pressing issues. For instance, the rising popularity of RCTs has led to a displacement of other quantitative work (e.g., observational studies, surveys) among empirical economists. This matters because it results in too little research on key topics (Akerlof [2020] raises a similar concern about an imbalance between “hard” and “soft” topics). Take public finance, a fundamentally important issue for improving state capacity to pursue its roles of growth and redistribution. Governments, bi- and multilateral donors require research on these important issues but there is little peer-reviewed research. They end up relying on gray literature and reports that have not undergone peer review. Important areas such as public finance are receiving little attention partly because they are not amenable to the methodological approaches that are in favor.

Solow (1985) raised similar concerns about research in economic history. Not only does the acceptability (or not) of certain methods alone displace research in important sub-fields of economics, it also skews the nature of research by altering the questions that are addressed. Only those questions that can satisfy the requirements of the toolkit are taken up.

Similarly, there is a displacement of qualitative work and scholarship in economics is impoverished since it does not provide space for such methodological approaches and in general, interdisciplinary work is not rewarded. This is a result of the “tyranny of the top-five” as suggested by Heckman and Moktan (2020).

Cartwright and Iguida argue that economics has adopted a too narrow definition of “rigor” and would benefit from embracing qualitative and mixed methods research. They illustrate their point by considering the informal economy. While there are a number of clever studies

applying quantitative methods to estimate of the size of the informal economy, they do not further our understanding of what is happening *within* the informal economy. Quantitative estimates show that lower income countries have a large informal economy, in many countries over half of the labor market activity is informal. However, the bias in economics against qualitative methods prevents a more thorough understanding of what makes up a large part of many economies. That development economists neglect a topic of such importance is highly problematic, since economists should be able to advise policymakers on how to intervene, shape and direct the informal labor market so that entrepreneurial activity can grow and support the economy while at the same time addressing exploitation, stigmatization, and inequality. It is high time for economists to make use of qualitative and mixed methods approaches.

Given the importance of informality Ackrill and Iguida provide a framework to guide researchers wishing to analyze the informal economy. They first review the economic theories of informality as well as different ways to collect data. Indirect data collection is based on the notion that although the informal sector is not directly observable, it leaves traces that can be found in comparing different official statistics (e.g., national income and expenditure). These studies mainly examine the size of the informal economy. Collecting direct data, such as through surveys, are typically in-depth but small-n studies. The authors provide a guide as to which data are required to test the various theories and advise transparency in the choice of the underlying assumptions and choice of data. Both types of data collections have shortcomings but could be used to inform each other to provide more accurate estimates and the authors provide insightful examples.

In their contribution Goel, Meenakshi, and de Souza show that recent advances in methods regarding difference-in-difference (DiD) estimation challenge previously obtained estimates in non-experimental studies. This then places considerable doubt on the policy advice based on what was previously regarded as “rigorous evidence.” Using India-wide data to investigate e-governance, accountability, and leakage in public programs from Banerjee et al. (2020), the authors illustrate that the previously published results may be misleading. Goel, Meenakshi, and de Souza raise two methodological criticisms of these findings regarding the staggered roll-out of the new management system across districts. First, the two-way fixed effects DiD design should consider the Goodman-Bacon decomposition (Goodman-Bacon, 2021). Second, the parallel trends assumption should be investigated. Their analysis suggest that this assumption does not hold, therefore, casting doubt on the causal interpretation of the results. The careful analysis by Goel, Meenakshi, and de Souza implies that we should refrain from making general claims based on comparisons that make poor counterfactuals for (methodo)logical, theoretical, and observational reasons.

Kumar and Venkatachalam are also concerned with the narrow methodological focus on RCTs and on average treatment effects (ATEs) as the outcome of interest. In fact, they argue, that questions of why, how, and more broadly what (for outcomes) are the more interesting questions to pursue. They make a case for causal mediation to enrich our understanding of these questions, especially as it allows for measuring path-specific effects.

In addition to problems as to how these pieces of evidence are produced, Pritchett and Drèze ask the question as to how we condense them into new knowledge and a deeper understanding.

Pritchett investigates how we can generate knowledge from different studies examining the same phenomenon. A popular method is to conduct a meta-analysis, but Pritchett is highly critical of this procedure. He argues that taking the simple average of the treatment effects has a number of methodological shortcomings and provides the illusion of external validity. Pritchett demonstrates this by exploring three different methods of deriving the ATEs. (1) The average of

the raw differences between the treated and untreated individuals can be calculated and then averaged. This method does not consider context-specific factors. (2) The treatment effect for each (country) case can be established using OLS regression analysis, controlling for observable variables. The average of these treatment effects can then be calculated. (3) Knowing that treatment likely depends on unobserved characteristics, Pritchett suggests the use of the method by Oster (2019) addressing the problems of selectivity bias and inconsistency. In two examples, he shows that the root mean squared error of the estimated treatment effects is smaller using the context-specific methods (2) and (3). All estimates also suggest considerable heterogeneity in the treatment effects across countries. Pritchett interprets this as clear evidence against the assumption of external validity, which is required to apply evidence from one context to another. He therefore concludes that although the individual RCT provides well-documented empirical case evidence, we should not mistake the meta-analyses based on a number of RCTs as “rigorous” evidence. The estimates of ATEs rely on indefensible assumptions regarding external validity and are therefore not useful for policy advice.

Another concern raised by Pritchett is that meta-analyses often rely on very few studies, typically only RCTs make it into these reviews while other well conducted statistical studies are filtered out. The resulting ATEs thus rely on very few studies. This is problematic from a science as well as policy perspective.

Drèze illustrates this selection issue by dissecting the RCT by Banerjee et al. (2020), he argues that although the authors conducted a study that fulfills all of the standards of the profession, they selectively interpret the results to support their main argument. In the RCT a new payment system for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in the Indian state of Bihar was introduced. The authors’ main attention is on the reduction of corruption in this existing nationwide scheme while not mentioning the huge delays in payments. Considering that these delays were likely to cause economic hardship for the participants and loss of trust in the program, it is problematic that the study does not discuss this. This is not only a question of selectivity and amplification as a methodological choice in the interpretation of the results but also a question of research ethics, a question we now turn to.

4 | MORALS

Some of the previous discussion already indicates ethical concerns. The narrowing of the methods determines the issues that will merit consideration, contracts the scope for the entire field, not generating sufficient knowledge to alleviate poverty on a broad scale.

As discussed above, Drèze illustrates a number of ethical concerns on the study by Banerjee et al. (2020) that examines the impact of a new payment system under the NREGA. In order to do so, the researchers collaborated with the Bihar authorities. This is in principle an exciting opportunity for economists to validate some of their theories using real-world data and to illustrate “impact,” an increasingly important evaluation criterion in career progression and funding decisions. Administrations may be keen to enter these collaborations to gain credibility. But these large-scale “embedded experiments” come with a number of ethical dilemmas. Take the issue of informed consent. Participants are not asked whether they would like to take part in the experiment, their consent only refers to the small minority of households willing to take part in the surveys (on consent more generally see also Humphreys, 2015). Given that the intervention was harmful for many of the participants (increased payment delays) there is also the

issue of compensation. In the event of harm, participants should be entitled to an *ex ante* defined compensation payment, as is standard in medical trials.

Khera's contribution seeks to show that (a) the problems highlighted by Drèze in the RCT he dissects, are not an aberration; such issues are widespread among RCTs conducted at least in India and (b) there are other ethical considerations that need urgent attention from the RCT community. This community extends far beyond those who conduct the RCTs and includes, for instance, the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) involved, journal editors, and reviewers. Her article contributes to a growing literature that documents such issues.

Ethical concerns, including manipulation of participants and illegality, are not exceptions yet IRBs regularly approve such interventions. For instance, in one experiment one intervention involved giving bribes in India and in another bargaining down wages (even below the statutory minimum, if necessary). Khera also raises concerns about the concentration of "power" (in terms of editorial positions in top journals), within the discipline, in the hands of those who conduct RCTs. Publication in these journals provides the stepping stone to jobs in the field. Even though this special symposium is hardly the first to raise questions of ethics with RCTs, especially those conducted in developing countries, she points to the lack of open engagement by the RCT community on these critical questions.

The articles by Chamola and Garza and Garza illustrate how interdisciplinarity is not a two-way street when economists are involved. Economists, if they engage at all with other disciplines, their engagement is very shallow.

Chamola's contribution relates to an RCT in the Philippines that is motivated by Weber's idea of "Protestant Ethic" and its influence on capitalism. Chamola shows how the authors of the RCT failed to learn about (and from) the debates among sociologists on Weber's original paper. The experiment involved an attempt at changing religious beliefs yet the ethical dimension so such an intervention are ignored. It also involved collaboration with a local organization, ethically questionable but in order to gain access, questions of ethics are ignored.

Similarly, Garza and Garza illustrate comparable problems, including technocratization of research in the field of urban planning, especially the rise of "evidence-based policy" with its claim of being "exempt from normative/political, and even theoretical, considerations." They seek to demonstrate why such claims are weak: while urban planning explicitly recognizes its political nature, evidence-based policy approaches strive at being apolitical when in fact they are not. Their main concern is that economists do not adequately incorporate insights and approaches to urban planning.

Both articles are concerned with the technocratization of economics hiding behind claims of objectivity, and hint at how understanding and knowledge production suffer as a result of this technocratic approach. For instance, in Chamola what starts off as economists engaging with other work in other disciplines (in this case Weber's work), ends up being merely a cute-sy and shallow reference to Weber's ideas, as a peg to launch into a somewhat troubling intervention in a real-world situation.

5 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This collection of articles, we hope, will trigger a conversation, some introspection and an acknowledgement that all is not well in the field of development economics.

Arguably much of the currently fashionable research is very expensive; however, this is not just an issue of money, it has a number of ramifications for methods and morals in development

economics. Research budgets should be spent more sensitively, for example, local assistants often face unfair employment conditions, they are typically employed on short-term contracts and are thus unable to obtain health or pension benefits. The current structures are exploitative, because they are characterized by low pay, long working hours and there is a strong dependence on researchers based in high-income countries, who are important future referees for early career researchers. This results in a lack of dignity for local researchers.

In this special symposium, contributors have made a number of suggestions to remedy the situation. Here are some specific examples. In order to increase the diversity in our discipline we should invite more researchers based in LMICs to join editorial boards. Special symposia are also a great opportunity to encourage economists from different backgrounds to participate. The associated workshops and discussions provide the feedback that many do not receive in their home institutions and help to produce manuscripts that do not fall at the first hurdle, ending up as “desk rejections.” A further possibility is to make the co-authorship of at least one local researcher mandatory. This is already practiced in other disciplines, for example, in global public health (*Bulletin of the World Health Organization*).

The issues raised in this special symposium are not only important for funders, editors, and referees but also for IRBs. The American Economic Association has in the past taken note of some worries related to RCTs. They need to revisit the evidence of the past decade and revise their stand accordingly. A commission, with diverse representation, would perhaps be a good way forward. In general, it is important to foster diversity in the spaces where such decisions are made.

One major concern is that there is a narrowing of the methodological space. Studies using certain methods are more likely to result in a top publication but this comes to the detriment of studying important issues. Furthermore, RCTs have little, if any, external validity and this generates additional problems for policy advice. In order to redirect research efforts, it is perhaps time to recreate space for economic history, history of economic thought, ethics, and so forth, in how (development) economics is taught at all levels. This may help remedy what Akerlof (2020) terms the “sins of omission.” For the longer term, initiatives such as the Curriculum Open-access Resources in Economics (CORE Econ) project, that attempts to change the way economics is taught, may lead to a focus on the most important social problems as well as improving inclusion and diversity in the economics profession: <https://www.core-econ.org/about/>.

In order to change things, we should ask ourselves to what extent is development economics serving a public purpose, helping us understand economic and social issues and furthering our fight for social justice (Das, 2024)? And to what extent are the incentive structures of the profession and of academia, leading us to bury these aspirations in the chase of a top five publication.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ One of us, the researcher based in India has, on several occasions, received offers to be part of a research consortium or proposal the day or night before the deadline or sometimes even later when those reviewing the proposal have asked the team to include a team member based in the Global South. She was not invited to contribute in any way to the proposal, merely expected to sign up as a member.
- ² Similarly to McKay, Biondi et al. (2021) provides an analysis of submissions data from the top four agricultural economics journals (including by gender) to study Covid-19-related effects. Seven female (and 11 male) contributors were involved with this symposium.

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