

A conversation with Alix Zwane and Mushfiq Mobarak on April 18, 2014

Participants

- Alix Zwane — Executive Director, Evidence Action
- Mushfiq Mobarak — Professor of Economics, Yale School of Management
- Elie Hassenfeld — Co-Executive Director, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Alix Zwane and Mushfiq Mobarak.

Summary

As part of its work aiming to support the creation of future GiveWell top charities (for more, see this blog post: <http://blog.givewell.org/2014/02/26/2014-plan-for-givewells-traditional-top-charities-work>), GiveWell spoke with Drs. Zwane and Mobarak about the possibility of supporting additional research on, and eventual scale up of, Dr. Mobarak's work on seasonal income support (via subsidies for temporary migration) in Bangladesh.

GiveWell had previously discussed this work with Dr. Mobarak (summary of that conversation here: <http://files.givewell.org/files/conversations/Notes%20from%20Mushfiq%20Mobarak%20conversation%2011-8-12%20public.pdf>) and completed a brief write-up on the topic (<http://www.givewell.org/shallow/migration>).

Dr. Mobarak spoke as the leading researcher on seasonal income support (via subsidies for temporary migration), and Dr. Zwane represented Evidence Action, a group that could support the scale up of this program in the future.

Research questions to consider before scaling up

Drs. Zwane and Mobarak raised the following questions, which could be answered by running a randomized controlled trial in Bangladesh significantly larger than Dr. Mobarak's initial trial.

- To what extent could results of a large-scale program differ from those measured in the smaller-scale trial? Specifically:
 - If significantly more people chose to migrate, could this lead to an oversupply of labor in migrants' destinations?
 - If many people chose to migrate, could this create an undersupply of labor in migrants' home regions such that, in order to maximize their welfare, some individuals should choose to not to migrate?

- What other, non-economic effects does migration have? For example, when husbands/fathers migrate for some period of time, does this negatively affect marriages/families? Dr. Mobarak proposes collecting qualitative data on family effects.
- In Dr. Mobarak's original study, participants were given either a loan or a cash grant to facilitate migration. To scale up, it will be important to identify incentives for migration that can be implemented on a large scale at low cost, such as providing a bus ticket to the migration destination. How, if at all, would changing the incentive change the results?
 - Originally, Dr. Mobarak was interested in working with the organization that originally implemented this program to scale it up. The organization determined each \$10 loan it made would cost it approximately \$15 to collect. This additional complexity led Dr. Mobarak to hold off on trying to scale up the program until he had support for additional research.
- Dr. Mobarak is open to collecting data on consumption as he did in his original study but notes that collecting consumption data is particularly expensive and would substantially add to the cost of the study.

Dr. Mobarak and Dr. Zwane also propose preliminary research in a different location (e.g., a country in Africa such as Malawi) to lay the groundwork for a possible expansion of the migration incentives program. The preliminary research would aim to find out, among other information:

- whether people already migrate and at what rates
- what time(s) of year they migrate
- what jobs they obtain when they migrate

Challenges to implementing the program at a large scale

Dr. Zwane noted that a key criterion for Evidence Action is whether a program can reach a large enough number of people such that it can have significant impact. If additional incentives to migrate turn out to affect only a small number of people, Evidence Action would be unlikely to continue to invest in scaling up the program.

Dr. Mobarak noted that this program requires government and regulatory buy-in. He was born in Bangladesh and had sufficient understanding of the legal context there to overcome regulatory obstacles to his original study. Such obstacles will pose a challenge to implementing this program in other countries.

Timeline

With support from Good Ventures (<http://www.goodventures.org/our-portfolio/grants/evidence-action-planning-for-future-programs-march-2014>), Evidence Action has hired a postdoc who could undertake preliminary research on migration in Malawi.

Dr. Mobarak would be ready to begin data collection for a larger-scale trial in Bangladesh in August 2014.

All GiveWell conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations/>