Economics, Social Science and Development[*]

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September, 2001

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Abstract

Development economics nowadays is mainstream economics applied to poor countries. An examination of the core principles of mainstream economics reveals tremendous strengths, but also tremendous weaknesses. Other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology and political science, have complementary strengths that suggest a role for them as equal partners in development studies and policy. The argument for a partnership of disciplines is logical and strong. But cross-disciplinarity is not easy in practice. It is best achieved through concrete exercises which demonstrate exactly how "two disciplines are better than one" when analyzing specific policy issues in development.

[*] This paper is an introduction to and commentary on a set of papers which will appear in World Development: "The Case for Cross-Disciplinary Approaches in International Development," by John Harriss; "Disciplining Gender?" by Cecile Jackson; and "Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches in Poverty Analysis," by Howard White. The complete set will appear in the March 2002 issue of World Development (Vol. 30, No. 3). I am grateful to John Harriss for inviting me to prepare this commentary.

1. Introduction

Development economics stands in beleaguered ascendancy, atop development studies and development policy. Economists and economic thinking dominate the leading development institutions. The prestige of development economists within academia, now that they have demonstrated themselves to be squarely in the mainstream of economics, has never been higher. And yet, something is clearly not right. Particularly in the policy domain, development economics is under scrutiny like never before—its prescriptions attacked, its analysis of development phenomena questioned. Often this criticism comes from other social science disciplines and social scientists, who feel shut out from the commanding heights of development analysis and policy making, and who feel looked down upon by economists, as being "soft" and "unrigorous". But increasingly, the criticism is coming from economists themselves, who are finding their tools and techniques, strong as they are, to be inadequate by themselves to address pressing policy and analytical problems.

Mainstream development economics today is mainstream economics applied to poor countries[1]. It has all the strengths and all the weaknesses of the current economic way of thinking. Part of the argument is precisely that development economics has become too much like economics, that it has lost its way from the broader perspectives of Arthur Lewis and Gunnar Myrdal. And here this stream of criticism flows into the broader river of challenge to what mainstream economics itself has become—something that would be unrecognizable, it is argued, to John Maynard Keynes, or indeed to Adam Smith.

The papers in this collection, by John Harriss, Cecile Jackson and Howard White, are critical of economics applied to development. But theirs is a critique in full recognition of the strengths of the discipline, and of its achievements. It is also an argument and a plea to allow other disciplines—sociology, anthropology and political science (SAP, as Jackson labels them)—their proper role as equal partners in development studies and development policy. As Harriss (2001) says:

"Specifically, I am concerned with the dominant position of economics in studies of international development, and within economics of methodologically individualist, choice-based economic theory. I do not contest the power of this particular 'set of rules', and I recognize that in terms of rigor and of parsimony it is exemplary in the social sciences. But I believe that it is mistaken to assume that because of these qualities work in other disciplines is only a kind of non-essential luxury to be afforded in the universities of rich countries; that it is mistaken to believe that the application of the same set of rules provides the most satisfactory explanations of political and other non-economic aspects of human action; and that it is a mistake, too, to de-emphasize the contributions of other approaches within economics itself."

I agree with the broad thrust of John Harriss's remarks above. In this opening commentary I want to provide my own perspective on the nature of mainstream

[1] In what follows, unless otherwise stated, by economics and development economics I will mean mainstream economics and development economics.

economics, the significance of the social science critique, and to pose the question of how exactly "cross-disciplinarity" is to be achieved in development analysis and policy.

2. The Core of Mainstream Economics

The core of development economics is nowadays defined by the core of economics. What is this core? Characterizations of the core have to be sharp enough to be recognizable to economists and non-economists as identifying the center of gravity of the discipline, but flexible enough to allow for the many differences that exist among mainstream economists themselves. I believe that the core of economics, and the differences among economists, can be identified along the following four dimensions.

First and foremost is "…the elementary—yet frequently denied—proposition that both parties to an economic transaction benefit from it, *provided the transaction is bi-laterally voluntary and informed."* It might not surprise people to know that this characteristically sharp formulation was provided by Milton Friedman (1962) in the first chapter of Capitalism and Freedom. What is surprising is how natural a proposition this is to mainstream economists. From it follows an instinctive suspicion of interfering in what appear to be mutually beneficial transactions. And this is not a "left" versus "right" issue, at least not in a party political sense. I submit that across the political spectrum, mainstream economists instinctively subscribe to this proposition.[2]

Of course, there are the words that Friedman put into italics in the original, emphasizing that he, like most economists, recognizes limits to this principle, "in principle". However, it would be fair to say that the qualifiers do not figure heavily as economists take up their instinctive positions on the policy issues of the day. For example, there is very little, if any, discussion in mainstream economics on what exactly it might mean for a transaction to be "voluntary" or not. The vast literature in legal theory, which shows how problematic even straightforward cases of "voluntary" contract can be, hardly figures in economic thinking at all[3]. Similarly, fundamental notions in psychology of what it actually means to be "fully informed", even about one's own preferences, are only now creeping into economics, as behavioral economics begins to get a toehold[4]. The very best theorists in mainstream economics worry about, and write about, social norms that determine and change preferences and behavior, the problematic

[2] For example, the famous argument by Lawrence Summers, at the time Chief Economist of the World Bank and subsequently Democratic Secretary of the US Treasury, that encouragement of the exchange of toxic waste for money between rich and poor countries would be to the advantage of the latter, basically builds on this principle. See Hausman and McPherson (1996).

[3] For example, the essay by legal scholar Dawson (1947) concludes from a review of the American law of duress that "restitution is required of any excessive gain that results, in a bargaining transaction, form impaired bargaining power, whether the impairment consists of economic necessity, mental or physical disability, or a wide disparity in knowledge or experience." An exception in economics, for example, is Basu (2001), although his argument for curtailing voluntary actions is related not so much to a questioning of the very notion of voluntary exchange, but rather to the consequences when there are externalities present—externalities are discussed later in this section.

[4] For example, see O'Donoghue and Rabin (1999). For an early warning on these sorts of issues, see Mukerji (1965).

concept of "the household", imperfect information, etc[5]. Indeed, a recent graduate textbook in development economics, Bardhan and Udry (1999), emphasizes these dimensions in the theoretical study of poor economies.[6] But policy economists, including policy development economists, seem by and large to be innocent of these writings.

This core principle, of voluntary and informed transactions being mutually beneficial, is the strength as well as the weakness of economics. It forms the basis of mainstream economist's instinctive position that interfering in such transactions prevents mutual benefit, and that when the mutual benefit is large, attempts to prevent such transactions will never succeed completely. The transaction will occur in another guise, where the benefits to the transacting parties will be smaller, but where it may have socially negative effects (e.g. when activities are driven underground). Where the principle is valid, as it might be in the buying and selling of foreign exchange in the streets of a developing country's capital, this economic principle serves as a powerful antidote to unthinking interventionism which can and does create the black markets we all have abundant experience of. But where the assumptions of voluntarism and information are not valid (for example in extreme forms of child labor, or in the national trading of highly toxic waste), the instincts of economists will be found wanting.[7]

The second broad feature that characterizes mainstream economics is the benchmark framework of transactions in markets where transacting parties do not hold power over each other. In this benchmark, every transactor has sufficient alternative parties to transact with so that any one party cannot determine the terms of the transaction alone. In the context of markets, this means the absence of monopoly power of any degree. It should be emphasized that in the training of economists this is a benchmark model and recognized as such—the alternative models of monopoly and oligopoly are treated in basic economic courses, and also in the high theory of research publications. But, without question, when it comes to policy the average economist by and large reverts to the benchmark model both as a broad framework and as the workhorse of analysis.

It is along this second dimension that one finds much of the critique of mainstream economics by some economists. As James Galbraith (2000) comments (italics in original):

"*The prevailing theory is the idea that price and quantity are set in free competitive markets through the interaction of supply and demand.* It is this idea, and no other, that lies at the core of the economist's way of thinking. And it is also the source of the profession's problem in getting almost anything important right…[For example,] Supply and demand in the labor market underlies the notion of that full employment cannot be

[5] To take just one example, see the recent paper by Akerlof and Kranton (2000).
[6] However, the introduction to the Bardhan and Udry (1990) reveals some of the intellectual tensions that mainstream economists work under. To give just one quote, "…our attempt to trace the micro foundations of development analysis in the postulates of individual behavior, i.e. our approach of what is called methodological individualism, should not be interpreted as a way to undervalue the substantial role of social interaction in influencing individual behavior or in determining the rules of the games that individuals play."
[7] I have discussed such markets in Kanbur (2001b).

reconciled with stable prices, that technological change drives pay inequality, and that rising minimum wages must drive up unemployment. In all these cases, the fundamental theoretical error is the same: ……it consists in allowing a metaphor, one that originates in markets for fish, to govern a profoundly human institution."

I have commented elsewhere (Kanbur, 2001a) on how one of the deep disconnects between mainstream economists and civil society, on how trade policy feeds through to distribution and poverty, can be located in the implicit or explicit assumption by the former that markets are competitive and by the latter that they are not.

The third dimension along which we can develop a characterization of the core of mainstream economics is to do with the consequences of a transaction between the consenting parties discussed above, for those who are not party to the transaction—in other words, externalities. Non-economists have a feeling that economists are not trained to be sensitive to the repercussions of one set of actions elsewhere in the system. This is not true. Economists are trained to worry about "knock on" or "spillover" effects—on other markets. This is the essence of the "general equilibrium" way of thinking that pervades mainstream economics. Indeed, this is the critique that economists often hold up to the policy prescriptions by non-economists who see a problem and propose a specific intervention to tackle it, without working through the implications of this for other parts of the economy. One example is a series of individual budgetary items each of which makes sense individually but which are problematic as an aggregate. That "the sums have to add up" is an instinctive reaction of economists, and it is a good instinct to have.

Nevertheless, while their training highlights externalities, in their policy avatars average mainstream economists are suspicious of interventions in markets based on the externalities argument. Strangely enough, for a discipline accused of being too theoretical, in such cases the economist is likely to argue "OK in theory but problematic in practice." The classic example is "infant industry protection", for which many mainstream economists have made elegant theoretical cases in their academic writings, but have opposed in practice because of empirical understandings based on real world experiences, and political understandings based on interest group capture[8]. For this reason, and also because of the hold of the benchmark model of free competition (in which externalities are not present), mainstream policy economists find themselves in the position, on average, of opposing interventions which others would instinctively support.

The final characterization of mainstream economics is along the dimension of interest in distribution. Atkinson and Bourguignon (2000) note cycles of interest in this topic among economists:

"It is difficult to think about economic issues without distributive consequences and it is equally difficult to imagine distributive problems without some allocational dimension….But distributional issues have not always been regarded as important by the

[8] As Bhagwati and Srinivisan (1999) argue: "Sure enough, therefore, one can ingeniously construct anti-free trade kinds of theorizing. But we must next ask the question: in formulating policy, do we view them as representing 'central tendencies' in the real world or merely 'pathologies'?"

economics profession. There have been times when interest in the distribution of income has been at a low ebb: in the 1950's and early 1960's, and in the 1980's…. Today, at the end of the 1990's, the position is different…. It is difficult to think of an issue ranking high in the public economic debate without at least some strong distributive implications…Within economics itself, the development of models of imperfect information and informational asymmetries…. have also caused a reconsideration of the efficiency of market outcomes."

So, according to Atkinson and Bourguignon (2000), the forefront of economic analysis is much concerned these days with issues of income distribution, although it was not so concerned only a few years ago. But among non-economists the prevailing view is that, no matter what the leaders in the profession are doing, on average economists are conditioned by their training to not care about distribution. There is some truth to this, but not in the sense of a "hardening of hearts" through training. The real characterization is somewhat different, and a lot more interesting. It is best approached through the very first principle—that a voluntary and informed transaction is mutually beneficial. Both transacting parties will benefit, but it is recognized by mainstream economics that one might benefit more than the other, and that society might prefer a final outcome that is more equal rather than less equal. Indeed, I would venture to claim that most mainstream economists would prefer a more equal outcome to a less equal one.

The real characterization of mainstream economics along this dimension is not insensitivity to distribution. Rather, it is the instinctive position that preventing mutually beneficial transactions is an inefficient way of improving distribution—that there has to be a better way. From this flows the policy instinct of using direct redistributive measures rather than market interventions to achieve distributional ends. More than 25 years ago, the late James Meade, Nobel Laureate in economics and an egalitarian of note, wrote a pamphlet entitled "The Intelligent Radical's Guide to Economic Policy." In Meade's characterization the Intelligent Radical is "radical" because of a strong preference for equity, and "intelligent" because interference in mutually beneficial transactions is eschewed in achieving this goal. This separation is captured and crystallized formally in the Fundamental Theorems of Welfare Economics, and it is these theorems, with their implications of the separation of "efficiency" from "equity", that form this aspect of the core of mainstream economics. Within economics itself, much dissent and debate centers around the technical conditions under which such separation is valid, and what one can say when these conditions are not met.[9] But, undoubtedly, the drive for this separation is deep in the core of mainstream economics. To quote Meade:

"In a competitive system those citizens who are well endowed from birth with inborn capacity or inherited wealth and social contacts and who are favored by the luck of the market may earn much higher incomes and accumulate much higher properties than the less fortunate members of society. The intelligent radical does not draw the conclusion that the competitive market should be abandoned, but rather that far reaching

[9] It is precisely the "imperfect information and informational asymmetries" mentioned by Atkinson and Bourguignon (2000), as well as technological features such as increasing returns to scale, which destroy the assumptions that underpin the separation of efficiency and equity.

direct fiscal measures should be taken by budgetary taxes and expenditures to moderate high, and to supplement the low, income and properties…. In general…the intelligent radical will advocate more direct general measures for the redistribution of income and properties in preference to particular interventions in particular markets for this purpose."

A related issue arises when, as a practical matter, a policy reform creates gainers and losers. Mainstream economics has struggled mightily within itself about how to assess situations when direct redistribution from gainers to losers, after the reform, could make everybody a gainer, but the direct instruments to do this just do not exist (again as a practical matter). Should one nevertheless go ahead with this reform because in this case there is a gain in aggregate (since the gains of the gainers exceed the losses of the losers) even though there may be an intricate pattern of distributional consequences? As might be expected, there is a range of views among economists but, on average, policy economists would instinctively give significant weight to the fact of aggregate gains, and would certainly be loath to reverse the reform and give up aggregate gains because of distributional consequences of the reform. Not always, but by and large.

To summarize, then, the core of mainstream economics includes but goes beyond what Harriss (2001) calls "methodologically individualist, choice based economic theory." It is characterized by four key features, at least as practiced by the average mainstream policy economist:

*A belief that voluntary and informed transactions are mutually beneficial. The problem arises in the definition of "voluntary" and "informed".

*A tendency to view economic transactions as by and large occurring in free competitive markets where transactors do not have market power over each other. This is despite their routine training on the theory of monopoly and oligopoly.

*A suspicion of interventions justified on grounds of externalities. This is despite routine training in the theory of why such interventions are justified, the skepticism coming for a belief that in practice such interventions will be subverted by the political process.

*An instinctive drive to separate out issues of efficiency from issues of equity, and to look for instruments that will address the two issues separately.

It is important to emphasize again that these core features are simultaneously the strength and the weakness of mainstream economics, especially as it is applied to development policy. The weaknesses have been discussed above. However, as Harriss recognizes, their power and usefulness should not be discounted. They provide a sharp framework and an engine of intellectual and policy analysis that can cut through the fog of competing concepts. They also provide a strong antidote to a range of instinctive positions held by many non-economists. For example, if a transaction is genuinely mutually beneficial, policy makers should be careful in intervening to subvert it—the very fact of mutual benefit will make it difficult to subvert completely. The framework of free competitive markets provides a benchmark against which to judge alternative policy proposals. A skepticism of certain types of intervention based on political capture already seems to be taking on board the insights of other disciplines. Finally, a conceptual

separation of efficiency from equity, and a practical focus on aggregates, helps prevent a "paralysis of analysis" syndrome even for egalitarians.

The three papers in this collection recognize, in their different ways, the strengths of mainstream economics as applied to development. Their main claim, however, is that mainstream economics seems not to be fully aware of its weaknesses, looks down upon other disciplines which have complementary strengths, and tries to go it alone in development studies and in development policy analysis. I broadly agree with these claims, and in the next section consider some of these social science critiques. The section after next takes up the question of how this situation is to be resolved.

3. Broadening Out

The papers by Harriss (2001), Jackson (2001) and White (2001) are directed to showing how mainstream economics, despite its considerable strengths, is incapable on its own of adequately addressing central issues in development, and how development analysis and policy would benefit greatly from treating other disciplines and methodological approaches as equal partners in tackling tough issues.

White (2001) takes head on the notion, undoubtedly prevalent among mainstream policy economists, that the empirical methods of other social science disciplines, being more "qualitative" in nature, are less "rigorous" than the more "quantitative" methods employed by economists in their empirical work:

"There is a perception among economists that quantitative techniques provide more 'rigor' than qualitative techniques. Hence it is often felt that economics, with its more rigorous footing, is a sounder basis on which to formulate policy advice. Three observations may be made with respect to such an attitude. First, the use of quantitative techniques is common in several other disciplines, with the US social science tradition utilizing these to a greater extent than the European tradition. Second, the real basis for 'rigor' is the proper application of techniques. Badly or misleadingly applied, both quantitative and qualitative techniques give bad or misleading conclusions. Finally, different techniques are appropriate to different settings."

All three points are well taken, but the second and third points are particularly apt in light of the discussion in the previous section. A good illustration is provided in Harriss's (2001) discussion of the role of the discipline of anthropology, and he is at pains to point out that anthropologists have just as rigorous standards of scrutiny as economists:

"The discipline of anthropology is centrally concerned with people's understandings of the world in which they live. Other people's ideas or understandings are obviously not easily apprehended and can only ever be interpreted. Yet anthropologists have developed exacting standards and subject the inferences derived from observation of what people do, and listening to what they say in different contexts, to rigorous scrutiny…[T]he point of studying any social phenomenon ethnographically is to understand action (what people do) and the ideas and beliefs that shape it. But it is

important also that the ethnographer contextualizes her observations. Even some of the greatest ethnography is not free from criticism that the ethnographer ignored the wider historical context of his observations. Evans-Pritchard's work on 'The Nuer' is a case in point for it ignores altogether the possibility that Nuer society at the time when he lived amongst them was undergoing a tremendous amount of change as a result of the circumstances created by colonial rule."

The above discussion is directly relevant to the first key weakness of mainstream economics discussed above—that the notions of "voluntary" and "informed" are deeply problematic. Simplistic interpretations can lead economists astray and cause a disconnect between them and the general public on issues such as trade in highly toxic waste or child labor. Anthropology is a discipline well suited to deepening the understanding of "voluntary" and "informed" within a cultural context, which would help economists understand better where their core principle is applicable and where it is not, and help policy makers understand whether the prescriptions of economists that flow from the core principle are relevant. But Harriss's (2001) discussion also makes clear that anthropologists themselves think deeply about their method and worry about it constantly—perhaps more than economists do. The requirements of "rigor" are different, but no less stringent.

At the same time, both Harriss (2001) and White (2001) give plenty of examples of "false rigor" in economic analysis, ranging from the data mining in cross-country regression analysis exercises that are the current favorite of many international agencies in underpinning their policy stances, to the mechanical application of individual choice models to politics (by economists and political scientists), relying on a set of simplifying assumptions such as that all agents pursue their short term interest, non-overlapping interest groups, high degree of information, etc. On the latter, Harriss (2001) comments:

"Of course there is nothing wrong about making such simplifying assumptions. But in this case their implications are such as to exaggerate the conflict and polarization that redistribution is likely to generate, whilst underestimating the extent to which elites may have an interest in redistribution…As a matter of historical fact the deductive theory is falsified…yet it is possible, because deductive theory is mathematically formulated and so appears to be extremely rigorous, that it will be perceived by policy makers as being 'right' and thus more influential than it deserves to be. But there is a 'softness' combined with mathematical rigor in this case, because of the mechanical reductionism in the assumptions that are made."

I would mildly question Harriss's hypothesis that policy makers would be more influenced by mathematical theories; the policy makers I know are quite allergic to the use of mathematics—unless they happen to be economists! But his basic point is well taken. The new public choice literature meshes well with the core principles of mainstream economics and has the same strengths and weaknesses.

Jackson (2001) takes up a challenge issued in Kanbur (2001c), that "we focus on the strengths of sociology, anthropology and political analysis, rather than continue to

make well known criticisms of methods in economics." Her focus is on gender research, and she recognizes that mainstream economics has contributed to and benefited from, research into gender relations broadly defined. But this is not enough:

"Why does excellence in gender research for development require sociology, anthropology and politics (SAP)? One answer is that development objectives have changed in ways that make SAP knowledges increasingly critical. Firstly, development used to be shorthand for economic development, but it is no longer. Social development, human rights and democratic participation have greatly increased their importance in development activity during the 1990s…Secondly, the recognition in development discourses that inequality was based not only on class but also on other forms of differentiation, notably gender, created openings for SAP since the theorizing of gender roles, relations and resistances has never been more than a minor interest for mainstream economists…"

Gender analysis is par excellence an example where the limits of mainstream economic analysis became sharply clear a decade or two ago. An interest in improving children's well-being, for example, cannot really be advanced through an ungendered conception of the household, or even the standard conception of the household as a "unitary" entity with common preferences and objectives. The resilience, or at least resistance, of the mainstream approach was also made clear. Every new finding on differential well-being of males and females within a household was argued either to be flawed, or a special case of the standard model and so not requiring a major rethink. Eventually, with the pioneering work of Amartya Sen and others, the ground began to shift. In 1995 a group of us (all men) issued a manifesto (Alderman et. al. 1995) that the burden of proof should from now on be on those who would claim that the household is indeed a unitary entity. It can be argued that the shift pioneered by Sen and by feminist economists such as Bina Agarwal and Nancy Folbre has led to stimulating intellectual developments in mainstream economics, as well as greater policy relevance[10].

The shift in the policy arena is nowhere clearer than in the World Bank's (2001) Policy Report, "Engendering Development," which according to Jackson (2001),

"…proposes a strategy based on institutional reform to establish the legal and economic institutions for equality, economic development to generate employment and social infrastructural investments for equality, and improving women's access to resources and political voice to reduce persistent gender disparities. It states that gender research needs to move beyond gender gaps, such as those in education and health, to questions of autonomy, leadership and voice."

It should be clear from the "core features" discussion of the previous section, that mainstream economics cannot undertake this task alone. Development analysis and policy in the area of gender requires as essential components, the disciplines and methodologies of Sociology, Anthropology and Political Science. If it is true of gender, it is also true of a host of other areas, including environmental policy and institutional

[10] For a small sampling of these writings see Sen (1980), Folbre (1986) and Agarwal (1994)

reform. The case for cross-disciplinarity in development studies and development policy analysis is very strong indeed. But how is to be implemented? The next section takes up this question.

4. Cross-Disciplinarity: What is It? How to Get It?

There is a fair amount of confusion in the use of the terms "cross-disciplinary", "inter-disciplinary", and "multi-disciplinary". For the most part they are used interchangeably, to signify in a loose way combinations of disciplines. It might be useful to define terms a little more precisely to indicate different types of mixing of disciplines. I use cross-disciplinary as a generic term to mean any analysis or policy recommendation that is based substantively on the analysis and methods of more than one discipline. But how are the analyses of the different disciplines to be combined? There seem to be two approaches. One is to go for a deep integration right from the beginning, and to keep that going right through the analysis, all the way to the policy recommendation, if there is to be one. Let us call this type of exercise inter-disciplinary, suggesting an inextricable interweaving of the different disciplinary methods. The other approach is to let each discipline do its best in its own terms and using its own methods in the first phase, and then to use the results from each discipline to develop an overall analytical synthesis, and policy conclusions if that is the objective. Let us call this type of exercise multi-disciplinary, suggesting a number of disciplines operating side by side but without substantial interaction until the first phase of the analysis is complete. Of course these represent extreme characterizations—there can be a range of approaches in between.

A central question for those who recognize the need for cross-disciplinarity, because of the weaknesses and strengths of different disciplines and methods, is whether it should be inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary. This question was posed, in a slightly different context, at a conference at Cornell University to explore how to get the best out of "Qualitative" and "Quantitative" approaches to poverty analysis (see Kanbur, 2001d), and it might be useful to consider the conclusions of those deliberations. As reported in Kanbur (2001c), it was first of all recognized that "Qualitative" and "Quantitative" signified a continuum of cases, along (at least) five dimensions:

1. Type of Information on Population: Non-Numerical to Numerical
2. Type of Population Coverage: Specific to General
3. Type of Population Involvement: Active to Passive
4. Type of Inference Methodology: Inductive to Deductive
5. Type of Disciplinary Framework: Broad Social Sciences to Mainstream Economics

Most analyses of poverty could be placed along each of these continua. Those closer to the left of the spectra would be recognized as being more "Qualitative" in nature while those more to the right would be recognized as being more "Quantitative." It was equally well recognized that there are strengths and weaknesses of locating at the extremes of any of the five dimensions. And there was almost universal agreement among the participants

that there were gains to be had from taking "small" steps from each extreme in the other direction, including along disciplinary lines.[11]

The benefits of moving in a quantitative direction from a qualitative base were best outlined, perhaps ironically, by Robert Chambers (2001). Martin Ravallion (2001) captured the mood when he wrote:

"The main barriers…appear to lie in the resistance of practitioners and reviewers to stepping outside the traditional boundaries of practice. Economists have traditionally eschewed subjective questions; oddly, while economists generally think that people are the best judges of their own welfare, they resist asking people directly how they feel. Psychologists have often obtained individual data on subjective welfare by carefully designed questions in survey instruments or experimental settings that are poorly designed for other purposes. And anthropologists and sociologists have often turned their backs on any sort of 'survey'. The challenge remains of how to best provide the information needs for sound and useful poverty analysis, drawing pragmatically from existing tools, and inventing new ones as needed."

Such "small steps" gains are well laid out in White's (2001) discussion of specific cases, including how qualitative work showed that the standard assumption that there was very little labor hiring or exchange in rural Africa was not true; how anthropological writing on Africa, which argues that larger families are better off, sheds light on household economies of scale in the conventional economic framework, and how an understanding of child survival is hopelessly incomplete without sociological and anthropological input.

However, when pushed beyond "small" steps (e.g. beyond including subjective questions in household surveys, or using a sampling frame for site selection in a participatory poverty assessment, or doing such a survey prior to the design of a household survey questionnaire), in a direction that would involve deep integration of methods at each end of the spectrum and the integration of different disciplines, the participants at the Cornell conference were cautious. They were concerned that creating a true hybrid might lose the strengths of each approach, with the gains lost in disciplinary and methodological confusion. Such "simultaneous mixing", as Ravallion (2001) called it, was seen as problematic by both the quantitative and the qualitative traditions. Rather, "sequential mixing" was preferred, where each approach would do its best, learn from other approaches, adapt these lessons, and then do its best again.

This caution might not sit well with Jackson's (2001) conception--she believes that the tensions will be productive, and she illustrates with the case of feminist economics:

[11] The participants at the Cornell conference were: Ravi Kanbur, Robert Chambers, Patti Petesch, Norman Uphoff, Martin Ravallion, Francois Bourguignon, David Sahn, Caroline Moser, Christopher Barrett, David Booth, Vijayendra Rao, Luc Christaensen, Jesko Henstchel, Paul Shaffer, Rosemary McGee, Ronald Herring, Gary Fields, Alex Wilks, and Erik Thorbecke.

"Contradictions in the concepts and methods of different disciplines, it seems to me, is the source of valuable critical tension which should be celebrated rather than avoided, and they do not necessarily impede interdisciplinary research…For example, some might consider the term feminist economics to be oxymoronic. After all, since feminism challenges foundational ideas of mainstream economics,…how can they combine meaningfully? That they do is itself of interest, and supports the notion that research with explicit values produces stronger analyses."

Cross-disciplinarity is not straightforward, therefore. In particular, true inter-disciplinarity, although worth striving for, seems difficult to achieve except in small steps. Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is mutli-disciplinarity, where different disciplines are set the task of answering a common set of analytical or policy questions, and once this task is done, a synthesis is attempted which provides an overarching analysis and policy conclusion. Some semblance of inter-disciplinarity can be achieved at this synthesis stage, as the different approaches explain their results to each other and use the agreements and anomalies as the starting point for a fruitful dialogue.

Such interaction between different disciplines is particularly apt to be productive in the face of specific policy issues and goals—for example, the goal of lowering female child mortality. These issues arise all the time in international aid agencies, and they would seem to be a natural location for thoroughgoing multidisciplinarity. But that is not the case at present. Many of these institutions are dominated by mainstream economic thinking and by mainstream economists. This is good for the economists, but perhaps not quiet so good for the development enterprise, and certainly not good for non-economists who feel shut out and unable to contribute.

The pragmatic answer is to advance cross-disciplinarity through the analysis of concrete issues and problems—child labor, infant mortality, female education, civil service reform, perhaps even trade liberalization (!), demonstrating how two disciplines are better than one. First, get the gains from "small steps" in the direction of other disciplines. Then let each discipline do its best and learn from the others in an atmosphere of openness and respect, and see how the conclusions of each line of enquiry, specifically targeted to a well defined and focused problem, can be synthesized in the policy context. Such an exercise will undoubtedly require mainstream economists to give up their automatic right to be the "lead analysts" in every situation. But if done with sensitivity and pragmatism, economists may see that the principle of comparative advantage at work—economics is relatively better at some things than others. And the interaction with other disciplines should spark intellectual innovation in each discipline.

5. Conclusion

Development is a complex process to understand. Development policy is not easy to develop and implement. Mainstream economics has great strengths, and it can play its proper role. But economics cannot do it on its own. Nor can any other discipline. The social sciences need to come together to address specific and general problems in development studies and development policy.

However, cross-disciplinarity is not easy either. There is the ever-present danger of the lowest common denominator. Instead of the strengths of each discipline, we may pick up the weaknesses of each. And, in the end, disciplinary narrowness may simply be replaced by lack of clarity. Also, such exercises may attract weak analysts who cannot hack it in their own discipline, in its own terms. We will have to be vigilant on each of these scores. But if the challenge is posed as addressing concrete issues of development, this should be attractive to the very best in each discipline. A program of multidisciplinary work can be fashioned that makes use of the best of each discipline. The arguments and examples in the papers in this collection make an eloquent case that such a strategy can work, and that for the sake of the development process, it has to be made to work.

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