



Abhijit Banerjee: Measured Success versus Failed Miracles

It pays to research ideas thoroughly and experiment in different environments before extrapolating social welfare schemes to a widespread audience

by Abhijit Banerjee | May 24, 2010

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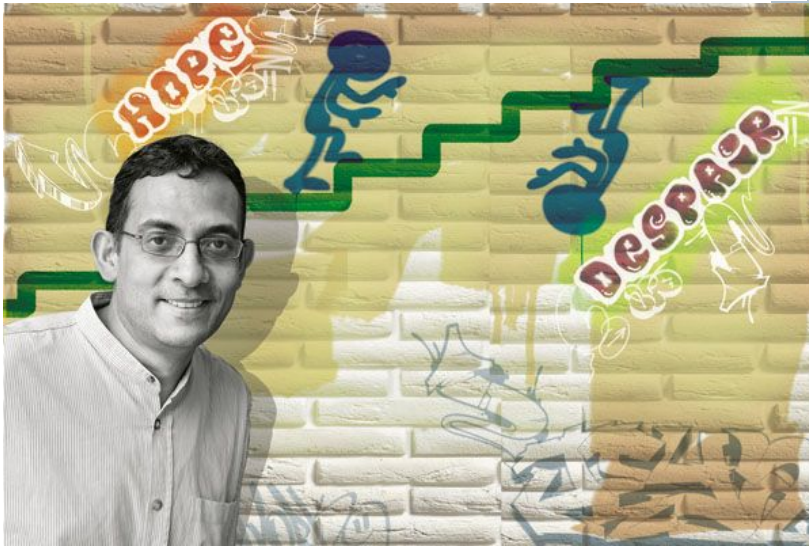


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ABHIJIT BANERJEE, Ford Foundation International Professor of economics at MIT

An alumni of the University of Calcutta and Jawaharlal Nehru University, he received his Ph.D from Harvard in 1988. He is currently the Ford Foundation International Professor of Economics at MIT. He is co-founder of the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL).

[Banerjee](#) is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and has been a Guggenheim Fellow and an Alfred P. Sloan Fellow. He has authored two books and made his first documentary film, 'The Name of the Disease', in 2006.

Here is an entirely banal idea that I think has the potential to change the world: Take evidence seriously.

Taking evidence seriously does not mean privileging numbers over all other forms of knowledge — theories, narratives, images. Nor does it mean the kind of radical scepticism that questions everything to the point where no action is possible.

What it does mean is being very conscious of the quality of evidence, about the danger of naively interpreting the patterns that we see in the world. It means being willing to piece together and think through the whole story — how is it supposed to work, what are the possible pitfalls, what do we know that could help us avoid potential problems. It means having the humility to know that our instincts can be (and often are) wrong and the modesty

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