

Research Statement

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Research Interests

Primary Fields: Development Economics, Applied Microeconomics

Secondary Fields: Macroeconomics, Economic Growth

Research Summary

My dissertation focuses on the impact of food security programs on poverty in developing economies. Specifically, I study the need for and the ideal design of a food security policy in the context of poverty alleviation in developing countries.

A significant amount of redistribution takes place through food security programs in developing countries. Yet, the role played by these policies in poverty alleviation has been largely ignored, especially in empirical economics. In my dissertation I answer the following questions - Should food security legislation follow a targeted approach or aim for universalization? How do in-kind transfer programs compare with cash transfer programs? What aids or hinders the working of these programs? These questions have been relatively untouched in the literature. The objective and motivation of my dissertation is to fill these gaps in the literature.

Working Papers

My dissertation includes three chapters on food security and poverty.

- **Das, S. “Whose Right Is It Anyway? Welfare Implications of Food Security Programs.”, *Job Market Paper***

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Governments worldwide implement food security programs to combat malnutrition, but there is a debate about which implementation strategy is more effective in developing countries: a universal approach, under which households of all income categories have access to the benefits of the program, or a targeted approach, under which only poor households are eligible. I address this question in the context of the world's largest food security program, the Indian Public Distribution System (PDS). The PDS provides grains at highly subsidized rates to the poor, and the extent of targeting differs from state to state within India. This provides an ideal quasi-experimental setting in South India to analyze the impact of universal versus targeted food security programs on vulnerability to poverty using a geographic regression discontinuity design. I use household survey data from the India Human Development Survey-II (IHDS II), 2011-12, for the empirical analysis. The results indicate that a more universal approach to food security is more successful in poverty reduction, and the effects are greater for the most marginalized groups. Households use the subsidy from the PDS to make various types of risk averse investments, all of which protect them in contingencies and reduce their vulnerability to poverty. They also increase their labor supply in their primary occupation and reduce the number of casual jobs they take up, thereby reducing variability in income and making them less vulnerable to poverty. These results indicate, that not only are food security measures sufficient for poverty alleviation, but a more universal approach is more effective, at least in the context of developing countries like India.

- **Das, S. “Why Queue up for Food? Tackling Poverty with Conditional Transfers.”**

Economic theory says that a cash transfer is weakly superior in terms of the recipients utility than an equal-value in-kind transfer, as it allows recipients to switch the composition of their expenditures from food to non-food more easily. The most common explanation provided for in-kind transfer is a form of paternalism, that is, to constrain

spending on consumption of undesirable items, like tobacco and alcohol, which may be more likely with cash transfers. In this paper I analyze whether this type of paternalism is necessary in developing countries by examining the effect of in-kind versus cash transfers on household vulnerability to poverty. Using evidence from a natural experiment in Ethiopia, where the same set of households are eligible for different types of transfer, food grains and cash, I address this question through a regression discontinuity design. Preliminary results indicate that explicit income transfers are more successful in poverty reduction.

- **Das, S. “Right to Food and Poverty.”**

This paper theoretically assesses whether food security measures would enable an economy to escape a poverty trap in an overlapping generations model. Specifically food security is linked to raising the level of subsistence consumption, which has an impact on human capital accumulation. The model shows that unless suitable infrastructure investment is undertaken along with food security measures, escaping the trap might not be possible. In fact, the economy could end up in a worse situation with lower growth.

Future Research Agenda

Future research projects will focus on poverty, education, infrastructure and other development issues. In future research I would like to empirically test the findings of my theoretical dissertation chapter, that is, I would like to investigate the complementarities that exist between food and infrastructure in the context of poverty alleviation. I would also like to work on effective education and child welfare policies in developing countries. In addition, I would like to broaden my research horizon to other areas of applied microeconomics with a particular focus on issues in developing economies.