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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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