Introduction to special issue on “Economic experiments in the lab and in the field in developing countries”

It is a pleasure to present to our readers this special issue on “Economic Experiments in the Lab and in the Field in Developing Countries”. It originates from the fourth Symposium on Economic Experiments in Developing Countries (SEEDEC), which was hosted by The Choice Lab at NHH Norwegian School of Economics in December 2013 in collaboration with X-Lab and Center for Effective Global Actions (CEGA) at University of California Berkeley. The aim of the special issue is to show how lab experimental methods can be applied in developing countries to shed light on a wide range of issues and contribute to new important insights in economics.

A common criticism of the lab experimental approach is that it is mainly used in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al., 2010), but this is quickly changing as demonstrated by the present set of papers. This special issue covers experimental studies conducted throughout the developing world of all types of populations, including small scale urban food growers, rural villagers, children and adolescents, clinicians, fishing communities, rice farmers, cotton farmers, disabled people, microentrepreneurs, local forest users, flooded villages, religious seminars students, and household couples. The papers also reflect the great variety of uses for lab experimental work (or related approaches) in developing countries; it can inform the development debate and policy making, disentangle the mechanisms of randomized control trials, provide the appropriate testing ground for economic theories, and allow for experiments with high stakes. Experimental work in developing countries also poses a number of particular challenges and the papers in the special issue provide a unique set of insights related to the planning and implementation of experiments in a developing world context that will be extremely useful for experimental researchers working in the field.

The papers cover a wide range of topics in experimental and behavioral economics. They study motivation for giving and pro-social behavior, inequality acceptance and fairness, cooperative behavior, risk preferences and poverty traps, the determinants of time preferences and competitiveness preferences, loss aversion, the importance of networks, the role of social context in shaping individual behavior, racial identity, gender differences in preferences, and the external validity of lab experimental behavior. Equally important, the papers point at a number of important unresolved research questions, and we therefore hope that the special issue will inspire new important research in this field.

Reference