

Obstacles that Southern Researchers Face in Publishing in Economics Journals, and Why the Research Community Should Care.



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Abstract

Researchers in developing countries face obstacles to publication in economics journals in two broad categories: those that make it difficult for researchers in the global south to produce research “like their northern colleagues,” including lack of funding, networking, English proficiency, and research capacity; and those that arise from the practices of journal editors and referees. High-quality manuscripts that analyze already-studied topics and written by members of well-known northern institutions are preferred over work by members of relatively unknown southern institutions who use the best available methodology—which might be nonexperimental—to analyze important and under-researched topics and countries. Such preferences undervalue local knowledge and discourage southern researchers from submitting to mainstream journals, and—more importantly—constrain cumulative scientific progress.

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I. Introduction

A growing literature, including several papers sponsored by the Partnership for Economic Policy, provides quantitative evidence that few researchers in the global south participate in development-economics conferences or development-policy debates, publish in economics journals, and are cited in others' work. Estimates vary across arenas and methodologies, but generally indicate that only 10-20% of participants in development-economics fora are researchers working in low- and middle-income countries, a result that suggests the marginalization of southern researchers. A strong defender of the status quo could certainly argue that differences in outcomes reflect differences in productivity and nothing else. According to this view, researchers in developing countries either do not have the skills to conduct top quality research, or, if they do, they migrate to a northern institution. We argue that such a view is not only incomplete but implicitly underestimates local knowledge and limits scientific progress.

One fundamental question is what constitutes a "contribution" to the field of economics. Though this is a complex question, most economists, in our view, would agree that the criteria for determining whether or not a manuscript makes a contribution to the state of knowledge include (i) the relevance of the topic and countries covered and (ii) the soundness of the methodology. Do the articles published in top economics journals—which are overwhelmingly from authors in the global north—effectively cover relevant topics and countries? Do they follow a rigorous methodology?

In our opinion, the answer is affirmative for both questions: individually, almost all articles meet the above criteria. The problem occurs at the aggregate level. In the population of published papers, many relevant topics and countries are absent or seldom included. This implies that some countries and topics receive an excess of attention—the United States and microeconomic evaluations of social programs, for example. The usual explanation for this imbalance of analyses is that a lack of data or of a solid identification strategy impedes evaluating alternate countries and topics with scientific rigor.

In a 2021 interview for the World Bank Blogs site, Andrew Foster, Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Development Economics*, was asked, "As far as we are aware, you haven't

worked in Africa at all. Have you ever been tempted to work on an African country?" Foster responded:

The scarcity of work on Africa by me is not for lack of interest. But a lot of what motivates me ... is the study of mechanisms associated with larger economic and demographic change. This sort of work is best suited to household data collected over longer periods of time and perhaps space. Data systems of this sort—whether administrative- or survey-based—were simply not available in Africa when I was starting my career. of course, data availability in Africa is changing and I do hope to find the right question, data and partnership in Africa before too long. (McKenzie, 2021)

Foster's comment is illustrative of what we believe to be the wrong reason. Economists need to engage with difficult and important questions for which only partial and tentative answers can be found. Methods should be selected as a function of the problem to be studied rather than the reverse.

In fact, researchers in developing countries can offer the comparative advantage of knowing which topics are most relevant in under-researched countries because they—and their families—work, consume, vote, invest, and study in those places. They are also in a privileged position to determine which research methods are feasible and cost-effective. In other words, they have local knowledge. However, their papers are more likely to be rejected (McKay, 2020). Editors and referees of economics journals usually prefer papers with high-quality execution that cover a highly analyzed topic-country over a creative paper with a lower-quality execution that covers an under-researched topic and country. This practice, in our opinion, underestimates the contributions of researchers in the developing world.

We discuss the main obstacles faced by researchers in developing countries in publishing scientific articles in top economics journals. We group obstacles into two broad categories: those that make difficult for researchers in the global south "to write papers like researchers in the north," including insufficient networking and participation in conferences, lack of access to technology and funding, lack of research capacity, language barriers,

environment, and visibility. The second category includes obstacles related to the lack of demand for local knowledge. Editors and referees of economics journals underestimate the value of local knowledge. We think that this is a major deterrent for southern researchers, and probably the major obstacle they face to publish in academic journals.

Figure 1: Our Analysis of Current Publication Practices

Topic-and-Country Relevance	Best Feasible Methodology		
	Experimental	Quasi-experimental	Descriptive
Very Relevant	Properly covered	Properly covered	Strongly underpublished
Relevant	Overpublished	Properly covered	Underpublished
Relatively irrelevant	Strongly Overpublished	Properly excluded	Properly excluded

Figure 1 illustrates our analysis of current publication practices—that is, what economics journals should cover vs. what they actually do. In fact, one of the main obstacles economics researchers in developing countries face in their attempts to publish scientific articles in top journals is what we call the “productivity criteria of the status quo.” In other words, journals tend to overpublish papers with highly reliable results (which usually means that a paper employs a strong identification strategy or mathematical model, such as in a randomized controlled trial) and underpublish creative papers that confront questions that can only be imperfectly answered with the best methodologies available. That, of course, is in addition to the endemic obstacles that researchers in the global south must surmount: insufficient opportunities to participate in conferences, “brain drain,” lack of access to technology and funding, lack of research capacity, fewer opportunities for networking and visibility, and language barriers.

II. Obstacles to Producing Research “Like Their Colleagues in the North”

2.1 Networking

Lack of connections to important members of the scientific community is a significant obstacle to publishing in top journals. Scientists from the southern hemisphere have less contact with and exposure to the mainstream of ideas and new developments from research centers of excellence. Contacts stimulate scientists intellectually and keep them up-to-date, and networking allows scientists to remain at the cutting edge of debate and to improve the number and level of their publications. Such connections are particularly important for non-English speaking scholars.

World Bank and Elsevier studied publications on Sub-Saharan Africa in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and showed that Sub-Saharan Africa had doubled its research output in recent decades (“A Decade of Development,” 2014). However, Lan (2014) found that, in 2012, 60% of the publications in the region were from international collaborations, mostly involving co-authors from institutions in Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development countries.

Uzuner (2008) cited four articles (Belcher, 2007; Casanave, 1998; Curry & Lillis, 2004; and Flowerdew, 2000) that investigated connections with members of core academic communities. All four papers showed that a network of connections to and within main disciplinary communities helped young, non-native-English speaking scholars to publish. Uzuner concluded that multilingual scholars would be disadvantaged in their ability to contribute to scientific knowledge if they were not connected to core academic communities. In a similar vein, Brogaard et al. (2014) analyzed more than 50,000 articles from thirty major economic and finance journals and concluded that editors of scientific journals accepted more papers from their colleagues.¹

¹ Amarante and Zurbrigg (2020) provided quantitative evidence regarding participation in economic journals of researchers in low- and middle-income countries. A related literature found that article submissions by authors who were professionally connected to the editor were more likely to be accepted and cited (Brogaard et al., 2014). This problem is not exclusive to economics. Hedding and Breetzke (2021) found that 80% of editorial board members of 126 geography journals were affiliated with an institution in Europe or North America. Demeter (2017) found that almost 80% of authors in the field of communication and media research were in the U.S. and Western Europe.

2.2 Participation in Conferences

Participation in scientific conferences is closely related to the creation of connections among scholars. The opportunity to present research findings and discuss issues with colleagues at conferences can improve the quality of scientific work and aid in the publication of journal articles and working papers. As Ondari-Okemwa (2007) pointed out, “attendance in such conferences allows scholars to understand the current paradigms in their various areas of research” (10-11). Unfortunately, as Burger and Chelwa (2020) have noted, scholars from the global south face obstacles in the acceptance of conference papers and, when their papers are accepted, they may not be able to participate in the meetings because of lack of funding for travel, accommodations, and registration. Institutions, organizations, and governments from less-developed countries neither appreciate nor understand the contribution that conference discussions can bring to research and, consequently, to economic development, and they rarely finance or provide resources for scholars to attend conferences.

2.3 Brain Drain

“Brain drain” is a phenomenon in which highly qualified and well-trained people migrate to other countries for better life and career opportunities. The benefits to and drawbacks of “brain drain” to less-developed countries have been widely discussed. Some development economists have argued that poorer countries are losing scarce human capital that is essential to escape poverty, but “brain drain” is rarely well documented or researched. According to the United Nations (2013), the number of highly educated immigrants increased by 70% in Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development countries between 2000 and 2010, reaching 27,000,000. Close to 5,000,000 of these arrived from Asia, mainly from India, China, and the Philippines. Similarly, the number of well-educated migrants from Africa reached 2,900,000 in 2010-2011. The countries that received the largest numbers of highly educated immigrants were Germany, the United Kingdom, Poland, France, and the United States.

Hauer (2017) examined “brain drain” in Mexico and Brazil and collected a sample of 140 participants from 20-35 who were currently studying at or had already graduated from top universities and who had lived or were currently living abroad. She observed that most highly educated people in Brazil and Mexico wished to leave their countries on a permanent basis and that many of those who lived abroad did not wish to return. Hauer’s respondents cited employment opportunities and salaries as important motivations for emigration along with improved career prospects, crime and violence in their home countries, cultural experiences, and better quality of life in general, and she concluded that the realities of “brain drain” should be of concern to those countries’ governments.

A 2020 report by BBC News Brazil cited Brazilian Internal Revenue Service estimates that the number of people leaving the country on a permanent basis went from 8,170 in 2011 to 23,271 in 2018, a growth of 184%, and quoted a number of economists and academics who believed the country was losing, in particular, “young people in scientific areas, [the] bearers of the future” (“Fuga de Cérebros,” 2020).

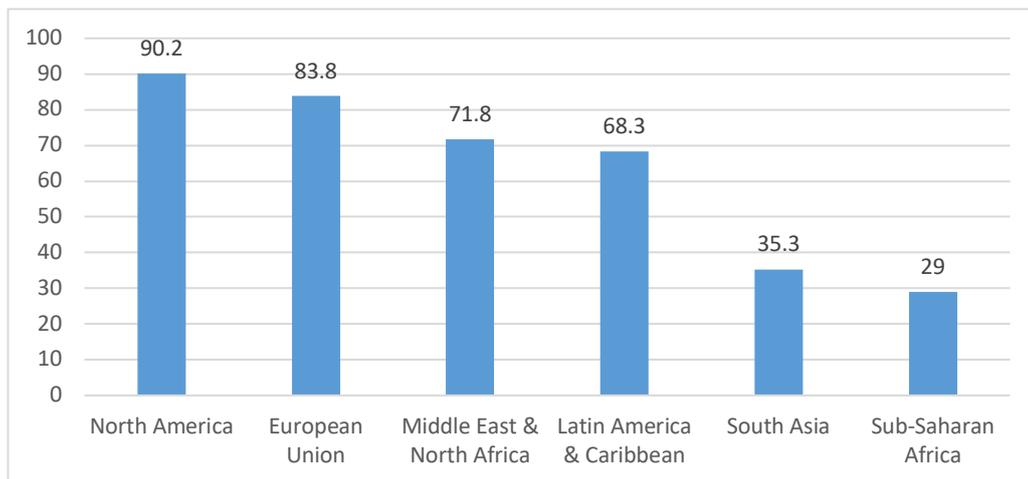
The scenario is similar in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to Ondari-Okemwa (2004), Sub-Saharan countries can produce highly educated scientists, but they are not able to retain them. According to Ondari-Okemwa, a mass exodus of scholars to developed countries has occurred because of lack of research infrastructure, low wages, decreasing quality of education, inadequate socioeconomic conditions, wars, and political conflicts (2007). He stated that “scholars whose origin is Sub-Saharan Africa but who reside in foreign countries may not be counted on to contribute to scholarly publishing in the [region of origin]” (8).

2.4 Technology

Digital innovations are an extremely important global phenomenon, but enormous inequalities exist among countries with respect to the diffusion, performance, and accessibility of digital services. According to the World Bank (2019), more than half of the world’s population has access to the internet, though this figure is only 15% of the

population in the least developed countries (see Figure 2). One reason for the large differences in internet access among regions is the high cost developing countries face, and the lack of digital access only aggravates inequalities (see "Digital Development," 2020).

Figure 2: Individuals Who Use the Internet, 2018 (Percentage of the Population)



Source: Data from the World Bank Indicators (2019).

Ondari-Okemwa (2007) noted that electronic journals had become important sources of knowledge transmission and communication. Scientists and scholars in Sub-Saharan African countries could benefit from such journals, but lack of technological capacity, low internet connectivity, absence of reliable telecommunications infrastructure, and inability to cover the costs of technology resulted in small benefits to local scientists. As a result, high qualified scholars in less-developed countries may not be able to submit manuscripts, read materials, or act as peer reviewers electronically. Ondari-Okemwa concluded that "scholars from Sub-Saharan Africa who are highly qualified and capable of making contributions to knowledge production are excluded because of technology deprivation" (10).

Along the same lines, Smart, Pearce, and Tonukari (2004) analyzed electronic publishing in Sub-Saharan African countries and stated that, although electronic publishing increased visibility, communication, and quality of local publications, access in African countries was among the worst in the world. Inequalities among nations increase when less-developed countries lack access to technology, and richer countries must help to close the technology gap in poorer countries.

2.5 Funding

Scientific institutions in underdeveloped and developing countries depend upon economic funding to finance research and technology. Together with human-capital formation, monetary incentives and availability of infrastructure are key to publication success. Unfortunately, research facilities are inadequately funded in many institutions and lack subscriptions to journals, updated library holdings, availability of computers and internet access, well equipped laboratories, and infrastructure such as electricity and fiber-optic cables.

According to 106 researchers and research coordinators whom Tijssen and Kraemer-Mbula surveyed across Africa (2018), the two largest obstacles to research excellence were insufficient funding and inadequate research infrastructure and equipment. Respondents also mentioned the limited involvement of the private sector in financing research and technology and urged the strengthening of public-private partnerships. Fox and Milbourne (1999), using a sample of 150 academic economists in Australia, concluded that research output increased 15% if the number of grants increased by 10% per year. Ondari-Okemwa (2007) defended the creation of a network of libraries to purchase scientific books jointly, noting that the practice was well-established in developed countries but was still not common in universities and research institutions in Sub-Saharan African countries.

2.6 Research Capacity

Low-income countries have poorer education programs at both the pre-university and university level, resulting in a much smaller number of highly educated people. Good research infrastructure and monetary incentives are important to attract highly skilled professionals to teaching and research, though universities and research centers in developing countries have poor infrastructures and scientists are not well paid.

The consequence is a shortage of qualified scholars in many institutions in the global south, which is one of the main obstacles to the improvement of southern scientific performance. Most scientists in the global south have not had the opportunity to study in

top universities abroad and therefore have not had contact with the cutting-edge knowledge, techniques, and methodologies that could be applied to their research. In most developed countries, moreover, graduate students help with research and reduce the burden of teaching, but scholars in the global south typically do not have access to large-scale higher-education programs (PhD). Additionally, because only a small number of researchers are employed, very little opportunity exists to do joint work.

Many African scholars consider the largest challenges to achieving excellence in research to be the shortage of qualified researchers and the lack of time and incentives that would permit scientists to dedicate themselves entirely to research. Because many universities also require teaching and administrative duties from their researchers, even highly qualified scholars do not have time to develop high-level research and publish in top journals. Fox and Milbourne (1999), conversely, in a study of 150 academic economists in Australia, concluded that research output increased 20% if teaching hours were reduced by 10%.

Human capital formation is extremely important for the development of research and technology and, consequently, for countries' economic growth. Monetary incentives and good infrastructure attract professionals to work in the sciences, increasing the number and the quality of publications.

2.7 Language

Researchers are well aware that they must present their work in English if they are to reach a larger international community and influence the world of science. According to Tijssen and Kraemer-Mbula (2018), publications in local journals may have large domestic visibility but are often invisible to international funders. Scientists who are non-native-English speakers, in addition, face greater difficulties in writing and publishing scientific papers in English because they may not be acquainted with rhetorical styles and, as van Weijen (2013) points out, because writing in English is more time consuming and cognitively more demanding. The result is a greater chance of linguistic error and of using regional styles that

are different from a particular research community's style, negatively affecting peer review. Another interesting point raised by van Weijen is that, if non-native-English speakers have greater difficulty in paraphrasing others' research, they run a greater risk of being accused of plagiarism.

In a literature review of papers that investigated English-language publications by non-native English speakers, Uzuner (2008) pointed out that access to the publishing world is like joining a club, which requires merit but which also involves biases in terms of race, national origin, institutional affiliation, and class. He showed that several papers "found potential bias against multilingual scholars' submissions to be one of the main reasons for these scholars' under-representation in global scholarship" (257).

Tijssen and Kraemer-Mbula (2018) surveyed 106 researchers and research coordinators across Africa regarding challenges to the attainment of research excellence in African science and reported respondents' view that the main difficulties they faced in publishing their research in top-rated journals were language barriers and their research focus on Africa.

McGrail, Rickard, and Jones (2006) reviewed seventeen studies that examined interventions in international higher-education institutions that were intended to increase the percentage of academics that published actively. They identified writing courses, writing support groups, and writing coaches as the best interventions to increase participants' average publication rates, corroborating the importance of language skills in enabling non-native English speakers to publish. In the global south, writing courses and exchange programs should similarly be provided to non-native English-speaking researchers.

2.8 Environment

An environment in which it is possible to exchange ideas, enjoy the free flow of information, and avoid censorship is ideal for knowledge production and scholarly publishing. In many underdeveloped countries, however, political instability and economic crises create environmental challenges that constrain research and scholarly publishing.

According to Ondari-Okemwa (2007), censorship is tougher for researchers in the areas of humanities and the social sciences and, because scholars usually work in institutions funded by state or federal governments, freedom of expression may be affected by government pressure and by university officials' involvement in politics.

2.9 Visibility

The main goals of philanthropic institutions are to enhance the quality of life in developing countries and to improve health, nutrition, education, agricultural production, and other outcomes in poor communities. Almost all of the foundations (the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, etc.) and the global-development research centers (Centre for the Study of African Economies, Center for Global Development, the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, Innovations for Poverty Action, Cornell University's Center for the Study of Inequality, the Overseas Development Institute, the Institute of Development Studies, etc.), however, are based in developed countries, just as are most international non-governmental organizations—mainly in the United States and the United Kingdom. Inequitable access to funding and inequitable partnerships both vitally constrain the visibility of researchers in the global south and, as a consequence, reduce the efficiency of research, projects, and publications intended to solve social, economic, and political issues in poor countries.

In addition, according to Levine (2020), 80% of philanthropic funds dedicated to improving lives and well-being in developing countries go to international non-governmental organizations based in Washington, DC, New York, London, and other large cities in developed countries. Good results from these investments depend upon the quality of partnerships between international non-governmental organizations and their local partners. To improve the quality of those partnerships: (i) international non-governmental organizations should establish long-term, mutually supportive relationships that allow local partners to feel comfortable in sharing important information and difficulties in program execution; (ii) local researchers should be more involved in the proposed work so that their

crucial knowledge of the political environment and specificities of the country can contribute to the success of the project;(iii) because grant disparities between international non-governmental organizations and local organizations result in less transparency regarding levels of funding, greater transparency and more balanced distribution of funds would contribute to more trustful relationships; and.(iv) because local researchers are rarely credited for their hard work and expertise in project development, international non-governmental organizations should fully acknowledge their participation.

III. Obstacles that Result from Lack of Demand for Local Knowledge

Researchers in developing countries usually have local knowledge, an important input in the production of high-quality social-science research. Editors and referees of top economics journals may underestimate the value of local knowledge, however, which is a major deterrent to the participation of southern researchers in mainstream academic fora. Ronconi et al. (in press) argue that the underestimation of local knowledge in mainstream development economics is partially due to the influential work of Rostow (1960), whose “five-stages of growth” model has provided a “one-size-fits-all” theory that undervalues the importance of local contexts.

Here we provide examples from conversations with colleagues from the global south and from our own experiences. It is not systematic evidence, but it does illustrate the costs of ignoring local knowledge and can suggest avenues for future research and analyses that can provide higher-quality evidence.

3.1. Local Knowledge Can Help Determine Which Topics Are Relevant

An advocate of workers' rights once told one of us: "How is it that development and labor economists do not study enforcement of labor laws given that noncompliance is so prevalent in the less-developed world?" We searched for articles on labor-law enforcement in top economics journals and found very few that dealt with developing countries. Not a single paper provided data regarding fines against employers who violate the law, despite the fact that about two-thirds of private-sector employees in the developing world do not receive the benefits to which they are legally entitled (International Labour Office, 2018). In other words, this fundamental policy instrument (i.e., fines) for addressing the phenomenon of widespread violation of labor laws in the developing world has received no attention in economics journals.

Another anecdote comes from a conversation with a Mexican public-school teacher who was interested in scientific evidence regarding the effect of teachers' unions on educational quality. The question is certainly relevant. As development economists, we consider investment in human capital fundamental to equitable and sustainable prosperity. At the same time, we know that the quality of schooling is relatively low in Latin America and that public-sector teachers' unions are present and strong in every country. Yet almost no papers about teachers' unions appear in economic journals. Is this because conducting RCTs of this situation is unreasonably difficult? Is it because the industrial-relations system in most developing countries impedes comparing unionized and non-unionized schools as an ideal identification strategy would require? If a topic is important, economists should make a special effort to analyze it (for example, by comparing results from alternative nonexperimental strategies).

In addition, very little empirical work exists on topics that are difficult to measure, such as the behavior of elites, the dynamics of shantytowns, or wealth distribution in developing countries. There are almost no articles that cover countries such as Angola, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, or Venezuela.² Few empirical studies test hypotheses in cases in

² In 2020, *The Economist* analyzed the American Economic Association's EconLit database, which contains some 910,000 journal articles published between 1990 and 2019, reporting that "the 70 least-studied countries account for just 1% of all mentions in economics papers over the past three decades" and concluding that "if critical

which the appropriate unit of analysis is aggregate at the country level, such as analyzing the effects of an independent judiciary on development—presumably because RCTs are not feasible. Similarly, few studies cover genuine public goods—such as national defense—because it is impossible to exclude some individuals (meaning that creating treatment and control groups is impossible) or topics such as the consequences of restricting freedoms because it is unethical to assign treatment. Should we be concerned about the exclusion of these topics? Who is in a good position to decide whether such absences are a problem or not? Researchers living and working in developing countries are particularly well suited to determine which topics are most relevant in their countries, and their opinions are valuable inputs in the difficult balance between relevance and quality of execution.

3.2. Local Knowledge Can Help Determine Which Assumptions Are Correct?

A researcher from Argentina was worried when the government increased the number of beneficiaries of a temporary work-incentive program to 2,500,000 (or 15% of the labor force). Her concern was that, in her experience, benefits in a smaller version of the program (called *Argentina Trabaja*) had been allocated on a political-patronage basis and not necessarily to the most deserving, and that instead of improving productivity, the program fostered dependency. She only had anecdotal evidence from years of social work in poor neighborhoods on the periphery of Buenos Aires. When she raised her concerns to a fellow researcher from a northern university, her colleague replied: “There is a rigorous evaluation of *Argentina Trabaja* published in a high-quality economic journal that shows that the program is very well-targeted toward the poor. The good targeting is because beneficiaries have to work to receive a small cash benefit, and only the poor are willing to do that.”³ She tried to explain that, while the work requirement was in the letter of the program, actual implementation was quite different, something that the authors of the “rigorous” evaluation did not know because they were in Washington, DC and not in Buenos

contributions to development come from difficult-to-quantify variations in cultural factors, a geographically limited discipline will find it hard to detect them” (“A Question of Illumination,” 2020).

³ See Jalan and Ravallion (2003), whose paper has been cited about 500 times according to Google Scholar.

Aires. She even wrote and submitted a critical paper to the same journal, but it was rejected because her evidence was anecdotal. “I was very disappointed,” she remembers. “How is that editors decide what is a ‘good paper’ for countries they have in some cases not even visited?”

This anecdote has important lessons to teach. First, the authors of the published paper got their sample of program participants from the Argentine Ministry of Labor. They presumably did not know they had received a biased sample of program participants because they did not have direct contact with participants and non-participants in the periphery of Buenos Aires. Second, because the legislation stated that participants had to work in order to receive the cash benefit, the authors assumed the requirement was actually enforced and were apparently unaware that, in developing countries like Argentina, the distance between the letter of the law and on-the-ground practice may be large. Including a local researcher on the team would probably have reduced both the likelihood of using a biased sample of participants and the chances of unfounded assumptions.

Another researcher was interested in informing the design of labor market regulations in his own country. He knew that theory alone was insufficient, and that rigorous empirical research was necessary—for example, to determine whether employers had wage-setting power. “I remember my high expectations, and later disappointment, when I learnt that the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, a top economics journal, published a paper entitled ‘The Regulation of Labor.’” In this paper (Botero et al., 2004), the authors computed controlled correlations across countries all over the world between the *letter of the labor code* and a number of labor-market outcomes and interpreted the results as causal effects. The same researcher noted, “Using the letter of the law as a proxy of effective regulation is probably a reasonable assumption when you are analyzing developed countries because compliance with the law is high. In developing countries, there is a large distance between labor law and effective labor regulation. Furthermore, the countries that have the most stringent labor laws are usually the ones that devote fewer resources to enforcement, biasing the cross-country estimates. An editor from the developing world would probably not make that mistake.”

3.3. Because It Constitutes Prior Knowledge, Local Expertise Aids in Understanding the Mechanisms, External Validity, and Scalability of RCTs

Economics journals usually consider RCTs the gold standard for applied work, and the most influential promoters of RCTs are often on the editorial boards of leading economics and development-economics journals (Bédécarrats, Guérin & Roubaud, 2019). Yet, RCTs are not without such shortcomings as ignoring prior knowledge, providing little understanding of mechanisms, and uncertainty about external validity and scalability. A growing literature examines these topics, including Banerjee et al. (2020); Deaton and Cartwright (2018); Pritchett and Sandefur (2015); and Barrett and Carter (2020). We provide another example from the developing world to highlight the ways in which local knowledge can address these limitations.

One of the best-known examples in the academic community concerns the scaling-up of a teacher program in Kenya. In an RCT implemented by an NGO, schools received resources to hire an extra teacher with an incentive contract, and researchers reported that the test scores of treated students significantly improved (Duflo, Dupas & Kremer, 2015). A team of researchers with local knowledge suspected, however, that the positive outcomes could not be duplicated on a larger-scale basis. Based on their prior experience, they conjectured that expanding the program would generate political opposition and that incentive contracts would probably not be enforced by the government. They were able to effectively test their local knowledge and, as expected, found no positive effects (Bold et al., 2018).⁴

An interesting characteristic of this example is that economists know about it because the Bold group's work was published in a top economics journal (*The Journal of Public Economics*), which accepted the paper because the replication used RCT methodology. In the large majority of cases, however, local researchers do not have access to the resources to conduct RCTs that could show the pitfalls of experiments that ignore local knowledge. In the end, the prior knowledge and experience of local researchers is lost, and scientific knowledge is not built.

⁴ See Bédécarrats Guérin, and Roubaud (2019) for additional prominent examples.

3.4. Local Knowledge Helps Determine Which Method Is Cost-Effective

Finally, the cost of goods and services in general, and particularly the cost of labor, is usually lower in less-developed countries, but local researchers have an advantage in determining which methods are cost-effective. There are numerous examples of excessively expensive RCTs conducted in the developing world by researchers in the global north. In contrast, teams in which there is collaboration between researchers in the global north and the south can be relatively inexpensive and equally productive, such as for example the RCTs supported by the Partnership for Economic Policy that rely heavily on the participation of local researchers.

IV. Final Remarks

In considering the obstacles that researchers in developing countries face to publishing in economics journals, we have grouped obstacles into two categories: 1) obstacles “on the supply side” (those that reduce the quality of research conducted by individuals in the global south, including lack of funding, networking, English proficiency, and research capacity, among others); and 2) obstacles “on the demand side,” which arise from the practices of journal editors and referees. In a nutshell, manuscripts with a high-quality execution, written by members of well-known northern institutions, and focused on already-studied topics are preferred over creative work with a lower-quality execution by members of relatively unknown southern institutions that analyzes important and under-researched topics and countries.

The preference for execution over relevance implicitly undervalues local knowledge, however, and discourages southern researchers from participating in mainstream journals. More importantly, this constraint is an obstruction to cumulative scientific progress. Approaches to tackling such obstacles could include (i) bringing visiting scholars from developed countries to relatively disadvantage centers to transfer skills and knowledge and provide assistance in the development of collaborative studies; (ii) financing short study visits

to important international research centers by scholars from developing countries to expand networking; (iii) increasing financing by governments and institutions to allow researchers in less well-developed countries to participate in conferences; (iv) providing infrastructure to develop research, offering better wages, and improving socioeconomic conditions, all of which could avoid “brain drain” and human capital loss; (v) expanding the involvement of the private sector in financing research and technology and creating a network of libraries to purchase scientific books jointly; (vi) training and supporting future generations of researchers in less-developed countries as well as reducing teaching and administrative workloads; (vii) creating exchange programs with English-speaking countries and developing courses for non-native English speakers to improve language skills and decrease rejections of their papers; and (viii) involving local researchers in development research in order to include the crucial knowledge they have of local political environments and specificities of the country.

Empirically testing our hypotheses is beyond the scope of this paper, and we provide only anecdotal evidence. We can, however, suggest potential analyses that could provide higher-quality evidence. First, it is necessary to recognize that there is a normative assessment of what constitutes “relevant” research. Following a long tradition in economics, we think that the opinions of people matter. What countries and issues are people concerned about and do the articles published in top economics and development economics journals reflect those preferences? Answers to this question could potentially be provided by a comparison of the distribution of the world population by country/region with the distribution of articles published in top economics journals. It is not difficult to guess that a disproportionate number of articles published cover North America and Western Europe.

A second possibility is to conduct regional surveys to gather the opinions of local populations regarding problems in each country and then to compare those results with the topics or countries treated in research published in top economics journals. Yet another option would be to define which topics are relevant in each country from the headlines of the main local newspapers.

In our opinion, economics is a social science aimed at improving overall human welfare. Giving researchers in the global south more space in academic journals, and

particularly in development-economics journals, can help avoid the pitfall of undervaluing local knowledge.

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