

## Democratizing development economics. What Next?

A new phrase was coined in Washington, D.C. this fall. In a speech at Georgetown University, World Bank President Robert Zoellick asked an important question: Is development economics today addressing the most important problems facing developing countries, or has it lost its way? No doubt, the question was addressed to academia at large, but in reality, it was intended to signal a process of introspection within the World Bank. After all, for the last sixty years, the World Bank has been at the forefront of the research agenda dealing with issues of economic transformation in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. His recommendation sought to end this intellectual monopoly and look beyond today's "elite retail" model of research and analytics. Zoellick painted a powerful picture of the many possibilities available to development practitioners: Data, analytical tools, and real time local information that can lead to ground breaking results by linking economic theory to practical policy advice via broad based empirics. He presented a new approach for generating development solutions where no one will dominate and all can play a part. This is the basic premise behind Zoellick's new phrase, democratizing development economics.

With this initiative, development economics too is joining the successful experiments of citizen journalism such as CNN iReport or the MIT initiative of "unlocking knowledge, empowering minds". Development economists now live in an exciting new era of "open data, open knowledge, open solutions". People with hands-on policy experience can hope to be able to influence development policy designs and final outcomes at global levels. Having open access to World Bank resources is the first necessary condition to do so, but it will not be enough to generate results on the ground or on a global scale. A number of crucial additional steps will be required too and some of these have large resource implications.

First of all, it will be important to make information resources available through one gateway portal otherwise, as Herbert Simon had predicted decades ago, "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention". There are very large numbers of sources that are supported by the World Bank with somewhat different mandates and many different identities. There is also a vast amount of data — lessons from other multilateral and bilateral donors supporting knowledge networks on development issues, like the International Growth Institute funded by DFID.

Second, in order to improve the quality of debates, dialogues, and cross learning, it is not enough that there is simply more information out there. There is, after all, no point of a search that returns tens of thousands of results, without discriminating among them. Even with efficient information systems there is a need for some intermediary institutional entity that will make this information usable for policy actions.

Third, how will anybody be certain of the quality of policy advice coming from all these sundry sources? Will there be some quality assurance function integrated in these experiments?

Finally, as one of the World Bank's own [blogs](#) shows, over 70% of the demand for development knowledge generated by the Bank comes from the developed world. In reality, there must be greater demand from policy makers in developing countries themselves. And steps will be needed to overcome the real constraints of resources, capabilities, and internet infrastructure they currently face.

Ultimately, development will only be democratized when the basic power structure within a society is changed. Athens, after all, would have remained an oligarchy if not for the steps taken by Kleisthenes to turn to the common people for support against the aristocratic struggle. Fundamental changes will be needed in the institutions of development within developing countries. Development economics is only a small part of this equation. Better information and policy analytics will need to be used by domestic constituencies for effective development. We need to go beyond the "world of international development".