



"I am not trying to find the silver bullet or the magic pill that is going to solve poverty. What I am trying to do is problem by problem try to make a little progress... to extract from a particular project, a lesson that is used to move forward into the bigger objective such as what is a range of things that you can do better in order to help poor people live their lives today and in order to get out of poverty tomorrow."

### Esther Duflo

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- Maitrise in History and Economics from Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris
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Prof. Esther Duflo has led a major shift in development economics. Her empirical and experimental research has yielded substantial advances in our understanding of policies and institutions that can improve health and education, and alleviate poverty in India and other developing countries.



### Tackling the poverty behemoth with research based solutions



What is the connection between a kilo of daal and the immunization of children in Udaipur? Does having a woman leader and quotas for women lead to better economic prospects for the communities they serve? These are some of the questions that were raised, and answered, by Prof. Esther Duflo and fellow researchers at the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), while trying to find better policy solutions for the problem of poverty.

Duflo employs a methodology called randomized evaluations, also known as randomized controlled trials. These were initially devised for the medical field. In a randomized evaluation, people are randomly assigned to either receive a program or serve in a comparison group. Researchers then compare the effects of the program on the group that received it to the group who did not receive the program (or treatment). This allows to compare outcomes for a program between two comparable groups, like better school attendance or increased numbers of babies immunized.

One of the studies conducted by Duflo, Raghavendra Chattopadhyay, Rohini Pande, Petia Topalova and Lori Beaman in several villages in West Bengal showed that on average, a female village panchayat leader spent more on drinking water facilities than a male leader. The people in these villages were also more likely to have more positive attitudes about women in general. This data seemed to show the effectiveness of quotas for women in leadership positions.

Duflo's research improves our understanding of how policies and institutions work in developing countries such as India. This is done, in her own words, with the ultimate aim of answering the most basic questions of "what makes poor people tick, what keeps them stuck, and how economic policy can help them?"

The National Family Health Survey has found that only 43.5% of children aged 1-2 years receive basic immunization in India, contributing to high rate of infant mortality. Unreliable supply of vaccines and lack of demand for preventive measures were found to be the leading cause of low rates of immunization. In an experiment conducted by Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, Rachel Glennerster and Dhruva Kothari in Udaipur (Rajasthan), mobile vaccination teams conducted camps which reduced the distance parents had to travel to get their children immunized. In addition, families who completed a whole set of vaccinations were given a kilo of daal. The results from the experiment showed that with such incentives, the number of people getting their children immunized increased by around 32 percentage points even if they have to travel great distances.