There are all sorts of things very poor people bring in poor countries don’t have. They lack secondary-school education, steady, and good medical care. They lack steady work and life insurance, bank accounts and competent legal representation, adequate fertilizer for their crops, adequate protein in their diets, reliable electricity, clean water, indoor plumbing, low-interest loans, insurance for their premature babies, vaccinations and good schools for their children.

But the central thing they lack is money. That is what makes them, by definition, poor: International aid organizations define the “very poor” as those who live on less than a dollar a day. Despite this, the global fight that governments and non-governmental organizations have waged against poverty in the developing world has focused almost entirely on changing the conditions in which the poor live, through dams and bridges and other massive infrastructure projects to bring commodities and electricity to the countryside, or the construction and staffing of schools and clinics, or submitting tracts of forests to biodiversity protection. The belief was this will end the poverty.

In the last decades, however, the governments of the nations where most of the world’s poorest actually live have begun to turn to an idea that some radical economists, Plato, Solon poverty and war development by simply giving out money. In Brazil and Senegal, China, South Africa, and dozens of other nations, hundreds of millions of poor people are now receiving billions of dollars to cash grants. The programs vary widely, but typically the money—dispersed through banks, post offices, main banks offices, and even, in rural Africa, ranging among cows with ATMs on them—goes directly to the poor, rather than being spent on particular projects by government or international aid officials.

The irregularities of cash augment the paltry budgets of poor households, alleviating the pinch of deprivation, but proponents also see them as a long-term pull out of poverty, and even a catalyst for economic growth. Research has credited cash transfers with improving the health and education of poor children, and there is also evidence that cash transfers improve macroeconomics, improve exp-reials, and allow the poor to buy eggs and sugar. On a broader scale, some development experts argue that giving the poor more money to spend expands markets.

Here’s an idea for foreign aid: just hand over the cash.

By Drake Bennett

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When helping hurts

ONE OF THE big debates in foreign policy is whether aid and trade are beneficial. Political scientists at New York University and the University of Maryland, for example, believe that aid gives a country a louder voice in international affairs. The United States has long been known to try to influence Security Council members by promising aid, so researchers at the two universities created a lab experiment to test the effect of foreign aid. The researchers found that when they randomly assigned countries to receive aid, they were less likely to support the Security Council, especially in cases of economic threats. The result suggests that foreign aid can be a useful tool in international negotiations.

Know fair

YOU DON’T HAVE to watch too many hours of sports to witness a ‘bad call.’ And if the call goes against your team, it’s frustrating. But what if the call goes against the other team? Would that bother you, too? A new study suggests that at least for players, a bad call is not that bad. Researchers found that players who were watching a bad call in a basketball game were more likely to feel happy about themselves and the team they were watching, whereas players who were watching a good call were more likely to feel angry and frustrated.

Green and fat

THE NEXT TIME you reach for that “healthy” product at the grocery store, think twice before buying it. According to psychologists at the University of Michigan, an “organic” label acts as a kind of get-out-of-jail-free card for people who are worried about their health. People who buy organic foods are more likely to believe that the food is better for them, even if there is no evidence to support this belief. However, this belief can backfire if the food is not actually healthy. For example, people who believe that organic food is better for them are more likely to eat it and, as a result, gain weight.

How down payments affect marriage

WHERE MIGHT you put your down payment on a house? In some cases, the answer might be “in the bank.” According to economists at the University of Iowa, a down payment can affect the likelihood of a successful marriage. The researchers found that when people save money to buy a house, they are more likely to save money for other things, such as retirement. As a result, they are less likely to save money for their own use, which can lead to a lower chance of a successful marriage.

Q&A

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Both Hitler and Gandhi, for all their profound differences, are moral agents, whom we see as capable of deliberate morally freighted action, self-control, and planning. One used his moral power to hurt Mother Teresa than a random bank teller. Martin Luther King Jr., and Osama bin Laden were one of Gray’s studies, people like the Dalai Lama, and Gandhi whimpering over a bruised knee. In view of journals including the Experimental Social Psychology (forthcoming).

Making (June 2010).

Schuldt, J. & Schwarz, N., “The ‘Organic’ Path to Obesity? Organic Claims Infl...