

## **A conversation with Dr. Michael Clemens and Cynthia Rathinasamy, June 21, 2016**

### **Participants**

- Dr. Michael Clemens – Senior Fellow, Center for Global Development
- Cynthia Rathinasamy – Program Coordinator, Migration and Development Team, Center for Global Development
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, US Policy, Open Philanthropy Project

**Note:** These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Dr. Clemens and Ms. Rathinasamy.

### **Summary**

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Dr. Clemens and Ms. Rathinasamy of the Center for Global Development (CGD) as part of an update on an Open Philanthropy Project grant made in March 2014. Conversation topics included CGD's Haitian migration project, three CGD working groups, and research updates.

### **Haitian migration project**

CGD helped design and has been working on an evaluation of a program to give Haitians access to the U.S. H-2A seasonal farm worker labor program.

CGD Research Assistant Hannah Postel recently went to Haiti and interviewed members of 18 participant households and 16 non-participant households who had applied to take part but not received visas about their current expenditures. While the sample size of interviewees was not large, the identification strategy is relatively convincing and the estimated differences in income are stark.

### **Advertising the program**

CGD has completed a four-page brief and a short video about the program. Dr. Clemens filmed interviews with eight Haitian workers in Alabama last November, and Hannah Postel took some video in Haiti.

### **Working group updates**

#### **US-Mexico working group**

CGD is using some of the Open Philanthropy Project grant funding to support a working group on a bilateral labor agreement between the US and Mexico. Dr. Clemens is happy with the progress that the working group has made.

CGD is planning two launch events for this project in September: an invitation-only event for 20-25 people, followed by a larger event.

## *Recommendations*

Three standard options for regulating the quantity of immigrants between countries that do not have an open border are a quota, a fee, or an auction. After extensive discussion, the working group decided to recommend using:

- A fee (the US Worker Priority Fee).
- A quantitative limit on the change in the flow of workers each year, which would limit the total number of immigrants in any given year but would allow for that limit to respond slowly to changing conditions, resetting the limit to a low level in times of exceptionally high unemployment in the U.S.
- Different terms (e.g. different visa fees) for agricultural and non-agricultural work, and for seasonal and non-seasonal work.

Given the current political climate, Dr. Clemens does not expect these recommendations to have much immediate influence, but he hopes they could shape the longer-term discussion of how to prevent illegal immigration in the future.

## **US migration and development bureau working group**

CGD held one meeting of a working group on creating a migration and development bureau in the US government, and plans to organize a second meeting eventually. It has been waiting to do so until it can identify a champion within the government to take the lead to some extent, but has not yet found anyone to fill this role.

## **Working group on global skills partnerships**

CGD recently signed a memorandum of understanding with the World Bank, through which it hopes to identify potential pilot partnerships.

## **Updates on Dr. Clemens' research agenda**

### **Book on immigration restrictions**

#### *Shifting the burden of proof*

Dr. Clemens is writing a book that reframes the issue of immigration restrictions to ask what case can be made in favor of such restrictions, rather than starting from the normal assumption that restrictions are appropriate. Dr. Clemens believes that shifting the burden of proof from one side of an issue to the other can have a significant effect on public perception, and draws an analogy to the shifts in thinking that have occurred on female labor force participation and racial segregation.

#### *Book contract*

Dr. Clemens has a contract with Columbia University Press, which has peer reviewed and approved his book proposal. The book will be approximately 200 pages and is due in July 2017, for publication in 2018. Dr. Clemens is aiming for

something stylistically similar to Steven Pinker's *Better Angels of Our Nature*: rigorous and quantitative, but with accessible prose.

Dr. Clemens anticipates that he will spend a lot of time over the next year working on this book, but that it will not take a large majority of his time. He plans to draw on the empirical research he has already conducted, rather than doing significant new empirical analysis for the book.

### ***The effects of UAE construction jobs on Indians and their families***

This paper has been 80% complete since February 2015. Dr. Clemens has paused work until he has time to fix problems in cleaning and coding the raw data.

### ***The Place Premium: Wage Differences for Identical Workers across the U.S. Border***

A revised version of this paper is now under review for publication in an academic journal. This paper attempts to measure the impact of immigration to the U.S. on wages of migrants and the tariff equivalent costs of immigration restrictions. The revised version uses econometric methodologies developed by Emily Oster to place lower bounds on causal effects when there is no good instrument or natural experiment to use.

### ***Split Decisions: Household Finance When a Policy Discontinuity Allocates Overseas Work***

This joint paper with Professor Erwin Tiongson will be published in 2017 in the *Review of Economics and Statistics*. This paper found that households from which a member migrates to work abroad use their additional income mainly to pay off debts, borrow less, and send their children to private rather than public school. There was no meaningful change in the labor force participation of non-migrant household members.

### **North Carolina Growers Association paper**

A paper that Dr. Clemens is writing using data from the North Carolina Growers Association on H-2A usage is still in progress.

### **Mexico-US migration research**

Dr. Clemens is working on papers on three aspects of Mexico-US migration:

- The influence of social networks and demographics on migration rates from Mexico to the US, starting in 1920.
- The impact of the Great Recession on migration from Mexico to the US and the effect of this migration on crime in Mexico.
- The wage and employment effects of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Bracero program.

*All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at*  
<http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations>