

Book Review: Environment and Development Economics: Essays in Honour of Sir Partha Dasgupta, edited by Scott Barrett et al.

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This volume of twenty essays seeks to honour Sir Partha Dasgupta and the field he helped establish: environment and development economics. With contributions by some of the world's leading economists, including five recipients of the Nobel Prize in Economics, in addition to scholars based in developing countries, this collection without any doubt leads the reader to desire more knowledge of Sir Partha Dasgupta and his body of work, writes Stuart Astill.

Environment and Development Economics: Essays in Honour of Sir Partha Dasgupta. Scott Barrett, Karl-Goran Maler, and Eric S Maskin (eds.). Oxford University Press. 2014.

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Essays in honour of an esteemed colleague can and should be taken not just as the measure of the subject's eminence or learnedness, but also of their style and values.

From these latter aspects one warms to [Sir Partha Dasgupta](#) as an economist and a human from the start. He must embody – if these honorific essays reflect how people find him – pragmatism and good sense, an inclination to judge research on its impact on the end recipient (in this case the disadvantaged in developing countries) and the intense desire to cross and recross boundaries in the pursuit of fruitful knowledge.

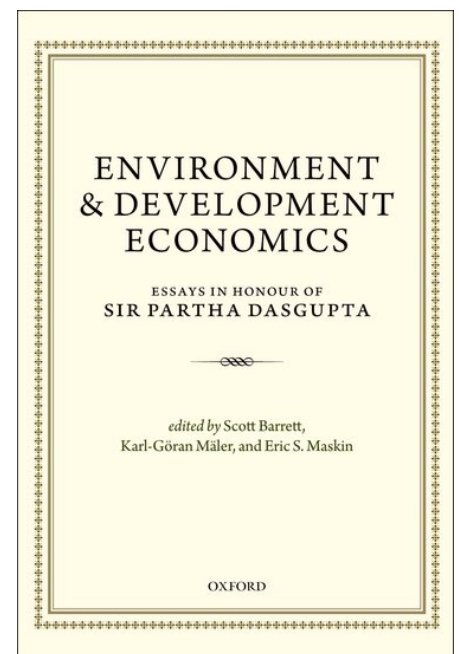
Dasgupta has a head start as a likeable economist from my point of view – he is in many ways one of the godfathers of wellbeing, but is disinclined to put such a name to it (or indeed any tag-line name). His early work sees populations, the environment, and development as economic questions of the first order, and his ongoing development of the interlinkages and importance of these subjects meant that he had a body of work before 'fashion' kicked in and got us all talking about it.

Joseph Stiglitz gives us an idea of the fertile ground in which Dasgupta's young seedlings of ideas took root; Cambridge of the mid 1960s where Solow, Arrow, Minsky, and Diamond were visiting and Stiglitz was learning alongside Mirrlees, Atkinson, and Dasgupta himself. Dasgupta seemed to have the knack of starting to think about important ideas before the reason for their importance had yet occurred – and then following up with timely wisdom.

In overall summary of his approach, to paraphrase Stiglitz, Dasgupta's belief is that all the things that are really important should not be assumed away but should be fully included within the scope of rational enquiry.

The essays offer a great range but, honourably, never shy away from putting some extremely important problems, both large and small, into the scope of rational enquiry.

Perhaps the essay that has a subject that most seems to sum up the variety of focus in this book and also the breadth of Dasgupta is Pant, Pattanayak and Thakuri's work on the issue of cookstoves in Nepal (and other



developing countries). In danger of being seen by some as a parochial issue it receives from Dasgupta, from Pant et al (the main chapter) and from Stiglitz (the response) the serious treatment that even those who understand development sometimes don't manage to give to this kind of subject.

Those who understand development well know that the only realistic and respectful way to succeed is to start with the human focus and then work outwards to either simple practical solutions (if that is possible) or grand generalizable theories (if that is appropriate). The cookstove story here is particularly satisfying because it hits all the targets. The foundations of the thinking are sound, simple and leading to empirical study and interventions on the ground that produce results. There is a healthy mix of human-centred economics (information issues, innovation), the 'nexus' factor of environment and human impacts, and, from the Stiglitz response, even a side-swipe at the fashion for RCTs and the chance to discuss power relations (both within the family and government) from an investment decision standpoint. So 'Climate Change, Cookstoves, and Coughs and Colds' offers not only a satisfyingly alliterative title, but a wonderful example of how the seemingly humdrum can flower into big impacts and even bigger questions about how we view development interventions.

Another chapter that is of particular note, both for its content and its relevancy to the subject being honoured, is Amita Shah on 'Natural resources and Chronic Poverty in India: Interface and Policy Imperatives.' It is a vibrant reads that throws up Dasguptian questions on almost every page: the relevance of GDP in subsistence conditions, the boundary between economics and political economy, management of the commons by governments and communities, and the unjustifiably widespread preference for focusing on market reforms rather than non-market reforms. On this latter case the scenario is starker than ever: we find uncertain economic theory (in fact, let's call things what they are – economic hypothesis) that can be succinctly described even though it may not be convincing. As a result, easily articulated uncertainty tends to take precedence and market reforms are prioritised over governance reforms. This is despite the fact that the governance reforms may be more certain in their consequences but set aside because the language is less concrete than that of pure economics.

The other fascinating element in this essay is the elegant exposition of a classic complex systems problem – beyond solution but infinitely explorable.

... the relationship between irrigation and poverty ... depends on several mediating factors (i) irrigated areas generally attract large numbers of in-migrants (often poor) from less irrigated areas; (ii) groundwater irrigation ... is often limited in terms of household coverage; and (iii) heavy depletion of water may lead to a decline in the productive base.

Add to this classic 'logistic map' complex model the factor that "benefits are inequitably distributed among households and within households" and the scene is set not for the foolish and restricted 'answer to the question' mind-set but for a sensible and broad ranging exploration of the issues, broadening outlooks and knowledge simultaneously. That is not to say that the chapter does not honour Keynes as well as Dasgupta by going at the topic "like a dentist" to suggest propose remedial work.

In the final account the whole book seems to do the job it sets out to do – judging by the number of sticky-notes and scribbled upon scraps of paper that I ended up with I conclude that most of the essays satisfactorily head towards or hang around at the fascinating crossroads of interests that mirrors Dasgupta's work. And, perhaps as the ultimate honour, this collection without any doubt leads the reader to desire more knowledge of Sir Partha Dasgupta and his body of work.

Dr Stuart Astill is Principal Consultant at IOD PARC where he works with organisations to achieve sustainable value-for-money improvements and embed change to better achieve their aims. He is a research associate with the LSE Public Policy Group. He has over twenty years' experience in Civil Service and consultancy roles in the UK and

EU as an economist, policy analyst and statistician and has taught widely on government, politics and economics at LSE, as Visiting Lecturer at Sheffield University and on the MPA programme of Sciences-Po (IEP), Paris. [Read more reviews by Stuart.](#)

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