**Building In-Country Partnerships in Development Economics: Chris Udry, Francis Annan, and Rohini Pande share insights from Ghana and Beyond**

Voices in Development: A Podcast from Yale's Economic Growth Center explores issues related to sustainable development and economic justice in low- and middle-income countries. This episode features Christopher Udry, Francis Annan, and Rohini Pande on ways development economists can form strong in-country partnerships to support actionable research.

**Transcript:**
Chris Udry: I very rarely have specific policy recommendations. I view myself as sort of a cheerleader, or maybe a coach for the athletes who are going to do the real policy work.

00:15 - 3:10
Catherine Cheney: Why do some countries advance while others fall behind? Who benefits from economic growth and who doesn't? How do inequality and climate change affect people, especially the most marginalized? What role can data play in answering questions like these and informing policies that promote economic justice? Let's find out on Voices in Development.

Hello, and welcome to our podcast. I'm your host, Catherine Cheney. We're coming to you from the Economic Growth Center at Yale University, which is focused on economics and data driven insights for equitable development. In this episode, we'll hear from development economists focused on issues ranging from agricultural productivity to digital financial markets about ways to approach local partnerships. Christopher Udry is the Robert E. and Emily King Professor of Economics at Northwestern University, co-director of the Global Poverty Research Lab, and former director of the Yale Economic Growth Center.

He returned to Yale to deliver the Simon Kuznets Memorial Lecture, an annual event honoring the Nobel Prize winning economist who helped establish the Yale Economic Growth Center in 1961. Udry's time as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ghana led to decades of extensive field research on rural economic activity in the region. He's perhaps best known for his work on technological change in agriculture in West Africa, and his Kuznets Lecture explored the decline of agricultural productivity across sub-Saharan Africa.

The literature says that agricultural productivity drives structural change outside of agriculture, but Udry and his colleagues have found that his options outside of agriculture improve. People are pursuing employment opportunities beyond the farm. In other words, growth outside of agriculture is leading to declining yields in agriculture. We are also joined by Frances Annon, Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of California, Berkeley, whose research focuses on digital financial markets, insurance and firms, and Rohini Pande, the Henry J. Heinz II Professor of Economics and Director of the Economic Growth Center at Yale University. They'll discuss the unique perspectives insiders and outsiders can bring to development economics research, as well as their experience partnering with local communities and universities in their work. One of the entities you'll hear about is the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research, or ISSE, at the University of Ghana. It's carrying out the long term Ghana socio economic panel survey. This is a cross university collaboration with Northwestern's Global Poverty Research Lab and the Yale Economic Growth Center. It aims to provide a scientific framework for a wide range of potential studies on the changes that are taking place during Ghana's process of development, and it's just one example of the kinds of partnerships with local individuals and institutions that will be the focus of our conversation today.

Chris, Francis, Rohini, thank you so much for joining us.

Chris Udry: Thank you.

Rohini Pande: Thanks for having us.

Francis Annan: Thanks a lot.

3:13 - 3:30
Catherine: I'd like to begin our conversation in Ghana because I know, Chris, this is where your interest in development economics began. You've mentioned that your time in the Peace Corps in Ghana helped to shape your research focus. Can you tell us about your time in Ghana and how that's shaped your approach to your work?

3:31 - 4:37
Chris: So I spent two years in Ghana as a secondary school teacher. It was during perhaps the worst time of Ghana's economic history. It was the middle of a quite serious depression coupled with weather problems that led to very bad harvests. So life was a little difficult for most people. For me, I was a young college graduate and it was a temporary state of being. I was comfortable and fine, but I met a lot of people who were going to suffer long term consequences from what they were going through.

I guess one of my most vivid memories is a family of one of the cooks at the school where I was teaching, and one of their daughters spoke, I know of five languages, and was clearly brilliant, and she was just fun to be around. But she was planning on not continuing school because they didn't have funds for it. And in fact, girls' school enrollment at the time past primary school was close to zero in the north, where I lived. And so just getting to know her and her family, it became difficult to think about anything else. And so that's the motivation behind what I do.

4:37:10 - 4:57
Catherine: Chris, I read an interview with you that was released ahead of your Kuznets lecture. You talked about why it's such an exciting time in development economics, and one of the reasons being that there are more researchers from the region where they're working. I wonder if you can expand on that a little bit, because I think it connects to that perspective you shared from your time in Ghana.

4:57 - 5:26
Chris: I'll always be an outsider in West Africa. I spent a lot of time there. I've learned a lot about people in the place and institutions, but I'll never have the insights of somebody who grew up there. And so having Francis up here, for example, is exactly what we need. This has happened in South Asia. It's happened less in Africa, and it's becoming much more common. And I think it changes the way we think about our work. I learned things from Francis that I wouldn't have learned from anybody else.

5:26 - 5:36
Catherine: That brings us to Francis. You were born and raised in Ghana, and I wonder if you can talk about how your upbringing has influenced your work and share some of those insights that Chris mentioned.

5:37 - 6:18
Francis: That has actually shaped the kind of questions that I study and the way I do development economics. Throughout I've been interested in studying issues that matter for welfare. So somewhere along the line in grad school, I realized that the best place if you want to make real change for welfare or policy more generally will be developing countries, Ghana inclusive. But I think one of the key features that was so common in a lot of developing countries, at least in Ghana, in the place that I was living at the time, was related to this lack of financial services, in particular for poor people. Of course, that doesn't

necessarily mean that people do not have access to financial services, right? Formal financial services, that's what I meant.

So I've always been really thinking of how do you create new markets that are formal in places where historically these markets have not assisted?

6:18 - 6:29
Catherine: If you just look at, kind of, the top line of the areas each of you focus on, they're different but complementary. So certainly opportunities for collaboration. In your research, can you talk about how the two of you have worked together?

6:29 - 6:50
Francis: One of the key common trends in this kind of work that I do is how to improve the information content of these programs or markets more broadly, of which I think that reminds me about Chris's work in the 90s, talking really about information in a very low income setting, being almost close to public within the village, and really how that facilitates the enforcement of contracts. Right? Even within the village setting, that was, to me, very powerful.

6:50 - 6:54
Catherine: Chris, do you want to build on that at all in terms of the complementarity in your research?

6:54 - 7:21
Chris: I'm very happy that my research turns out to be useful to somebody. What I see in Francis's work is often an insight that is as simple but powerful. For example, your mobile money agent's work and the difficulty people have in understanding what charges are fair and what charges are not. It just shows how a simple information asymmetry can cause a whole market to fail in a way that is rather easily solvable once you see the issue.

7:22 - 7:49
Catherine: Chris, you've mentioned that some of the work you're most drawn to is trying to understand complicated questions having to do with why it's so difficult for individuals and communities to escape from poverty. And you've said these kinds of questions require a deep understanding of people's economic conditions, institutional arrangements, and social constraints, or, as you put it: the multiple dimensions of their lives that shape their economic well-being. How do you get there? What's the approach that you take?

7:49 - 9:13
Chris: I think it's by picking out specific questions that you can actually understand. So it's simplifying from a lot of the complexities. So for example, in trying to understand how household agriculture is organized in southern Ghana, we started with a fairly simple question, which is why did the plots of women yield so much less than the plots of their husbands in coming up with an answer, trying to understand that phenomenon, we asked a lot of survey questions about how people got hold of land, how they farm the land, how they chose crops.

And we discovered that women were not leaving their land fallow to maintain its fertility. Finding something like that led to further questions. So it was a vivid moment in time. I was having a discussion with a group of women with my preliminary results asking them, look, your husbands are producing twice as much as you are, and they're following their land for six years where you haven't left your land fallow for a number of years now. Why not? They just told me the answer. They weren't able to follow their land because if they followed it, they were likely to lose it because they didn't have control over the land.

The land was their husband's family land. If they weren't using it, the chief would reallocate it to somebody else. So there were multiple dimensions of people's lives at play, but it was in a limited realm where I could understand how they interacted.

9:13 - 9:42
Catherine: Rohini, I want to bring you into this because you had the insight to invite Chris as well as Francis for this conversation, in part because a common thread in their research has to do with local partnerships, and we hear the term local partnerships a lot. But in terms of what that really looks like, I mean, Chris just gave a great example, sitting down with women and just asking them, so can you talk a little bit about that? What strikes you in their work, and how it connects with some other important, exciting work you're seeing in development economics?

9:42 - 12:25
Rohini: I wanted to pick up on one thing that Chris mentioned earlier on, saying that how he felt that he would spend a lot of time in Western Africa, but always be an outsider. And I think sometimes being an outsider can be very valuable to give perspectives. And now I can reflect on my own decision of what to work on. And I grew up in India, so I was very much an insider, but it took me leaving India and going to, I think, another country where you're an outsider, they sort of realize how hierarchical a system is or how the social structure means that you can be very elite and yet see yourself as a middle class person.

I think all perspectives are valuable, and I think certainly there's a lot you learn by being part of a society. But I think often, I think notions of justice or inclusion, sometimes you need to take a little bit of a distance, because otherwise you're far too embedded in that system to realize just how much you yourself are enjoying a position of power. So, I mean, Chris has always been an incredibly modest person, but I think a lot of us in development are extremely grateful that outsiders like him have often reminded us of what the important questions to focus on are.

If I think about certainly the work going on by many of my fantastic colleagues in the Economic Growth Center, or more broadly in development, I think it is this interplay of having not just incredibly good technical skills, but I think also a strong moral compass. We often forget that development economics isn't purely a, kind of, a positive domain. Of course it is, a lot of what we're doing is trying to understand why the individual stays poor. But, you know, why do we focus on the question? I think the questions that development economists choose to focus on does come from having a, I think, a normative standpoint and what we think is the good life, or what is it that we think people should enjoy or how they should live.

And I think that's something that I see across the work of my colleagues, that they have an ability to ask what I think of as the right question. And that's formed both by having, of course, a strong technical training, but importantly also by spending time with a lot of local partners to understand for them what is the good life or what are the right ways to lead your life. And I think that's certainly a place where if you're an outsider, you can reflect on it, but you do need to hear people tell you what it is that they value and why they value.

If I think about, for instance, the work that the Inclusion Economics group is doing in India or Nepal, or I think about some of the work that my colleague Lauren Falcao Bergquist is doing in Africa. It's very much, I think, shaped by an interest in thinking about what is important, not just for what we think of making markets work better, economic efficiency, but also the distribution consequences that they have.

12:25 - 12:34
Catherine: Chris, I want to hear a little bit more about how these local partnerships play into your research in terms of conducting the research, relaying the findings.

12:34 - 14:42
Chris: I could talk about that on, I think, three different levels. One would be the partners who I'm working with, who are participating in the surveys or the randomized controlled trials of particular programmes. So they're devoting a lot of time to answering our questions. So they're investing in the research that I'm doing. It's clear that I have an obligation to let them know what we found as a consequence of their participation. I can't do that myself, but my research team can.

And so we try to give feedback in each of the communities where we're working, when we have enough to say that makes it worthwhile, that's expensive. And we have to be careful because our research is often tentative. We're not sure about what we find, certainly not right away. And so there's a balance to be made between being confident in what you're telling people you've found and doing it in a timely manner. A special coda to that. We know that our research teams have gravitas in these communities, and so if they come in and say something, people tend to take it pretty seriously. And so saying something that's not correct could really hurt people.

A second kind of partnership is with local institutions who are participating, trying to understand a contract that they're writing or a program that they're offering. And so participating in a randomized controlled trial to evaluate the impact. That's a long term commitment, multiple years. Typically, it requires partners who are willing to be flexible and who want to learn from their experience. And so I think we've all had partnerships like that.

And the third type of partnership is the one that I guess I value most at this point. And that's my partnership with scholars, especially at the University of Ghana and a University of Development Studies in Tamale, where I can work with people who are much earlier in their career stage than I am, and pass ideas back and forth and generate new ideas and help find funding and help organize. Yeah, I think that's probably, to me, the most valuable kinds of collaboration that I have.

14:42 - 14:57
Catherine: Let's hear from Francis or Rohini on this as well. Chris mentioned that each of you have been involved in similar collaborations. I want to pick up, especially on that last point about local universities, and hear any reflections either of you have on their value in these research collaborations.

14:57 - 17:37
Francis: Two things. One is that there's an amazing set of talent, scholars and institutions, and it keeps flourishing over time, especially in Ghana, that I can tell when it comes to producing research and also using research. And I'll be more precise about what I mean in a minute. As economists, we've spent a lot of time building a lot of technical skills, analyzing data, try to create inference, but I don't think we put a lot of time in terms of the production of the data, which is really, really important going back to the foundations of how the data come about. And for me, I think this is where I think the idea of local scholars and local institutions playing a role to carefully measure things that we intended to measure right in the field, really come into play.

So I'll say there's an amazing set of talents. And one thing I sense, Chris, is, he said some of the institutions that Chris actually has helped develop, actually in Ghana, including the Institute for Statistical, Social and Economic Research, is actually one of the leading centers for excellent research and development. And I remember when I was in the search with the Gates Foundation for places to host this new research initiative of financial services for the poor. It became so easy. Our work was easy. We couldn't count on any other institution than ISSE and so it's such a phenomenal capacity that I think has been developed over time through Chris and I'm sure Rohini in other context, that actually is laying a

very, very strong foundation for engaging local institutions or universities to do things that we couldn't do ten years ago.

The second thing is that, you know, they are equally, greatly well trained scholars that are actually locally based in Ghana, very ready to do research, folks that are really interested in engaging and doing research that really matters for their context. And it's so exciting. I have not struggled to find local partners at all. If there's anything the sample size that I have for, it's all the positive part of local partnerships and local engagements in many, many ways. In fact, I was telling Chris today, the government institutions and even other authorities in Ghana that lead policy regulators are remarkably open to really high level partnerships. That really matters for doing economic research.

For me, this is very fascinating because over time in the field, we've spent a lot of time building evidence about what works versus what does not work. And then we came to this tradition of evidence to action, which can be very depressing if you think very carefully about it. You know, it clearly tells us we build a lot of evidence, and now we are taking the evidence in many, many ways. But you could argue whether this is a successful process or not. But if the local institutions, the regulators, the users of this evidence were part of the production process for this evidence, it actually makes our life easier. This idea of flourishing institutions and local partners in Ghana in particular. And I can say it's such an amazing time for everyone to do work in this space.

17:37 - 17:55
Catherine: Rohini, I'd love to hear your thoughts and a follow up question to include is. I know each of you are focused on linking research and policy, so I'd love to hear your thoughts on the role of local universities and local partnerships, and why that is also so key in that research to policy translation.

17:55 - 20:00
Rohini: I can talk about two settings where I think I've had some engagement a lot with local universities, and they're very different, which is India and Nepal. But a common theme in both of them, and I'd be curious to hear whether this tension comes up in Ghana, is what we may think should be the kind of highest level value in universities on research is really not how the career objectives of local researchers are set up. They tend to have relatively high teaching loads compared to, say, what we would think of in our universities.

They don't have a lot of promotion incentives linked to publishing. Well, so they are of course, they would love to do it. And I completely agree with Francis. They have incredible talents, but in some ways we're very lucky that we live in universities that have given us a structure where there isn't this misalignment between what we want to do in research and what our job asks us to do. I think it has caused me, over time, to be a little bit more careful in thinking about what it means to collaborate.

You know, for instance, I think you want to be much more careful in thinking about what it would mean financially for someone to collaborate, you know, do we actually manage to raise the kind of resources that would make it worthwhile for someone who has a job, who has obligations to do research, rather than work for an international consultancy. This is a tension that may be a little bit less in India, because there's not a lot of development aid that's pushing the development agenda as much, but it's certainly true in Nepal. For us, the competition is not the fact that their research is behind the work. It's like they can actually be working in a private sector consultancy, producing reports for aid agencies, and often it'll make a lot more sense for them to be doing that rather than doing research with a slow timeline and no clear enumeration to them. So, I mean, I'd be curious to hear from Francis and Chris whether they've seen this, but that's certainly something as a tension – like I would agree with everything else, there's great talent, we love to collaborate, but that certainly is a tension that has muted a little bit my keenness to push on that dimension.

20:00 - 21:06
Francis: This is a common constraint you find in Ghana as well. The teaching load for scholars in universities who are potential collaborators or local partners is remarkably too high relative to what the expectation is for research. And so the incentives are not really perfectly aligned, as Rohini puts it. But I think at the same time, what has been successful and I can reflect more on this is at least for me, is that within the universities, there are all these embedded research institutes where folks are not expected to be teaching as much as, say, people in the business school, for example.

And so the teaching requirement for a scholar in ISSE is almost less than 10% relative to, say, research. So there are these pockets of, you know, stylized centers within universities that provide this infrastructure for you to actually develop partnerships where research could be kind of something foundational for what, you know, folks are interested in. But I want to emphasize, yeah, it is a very common trend. It's by no means limited to Nepal. It's a real friction across all the universities. But I'm sure with some level of understanding and maybe of the organizational structure of the universities, there are cases where you're able to make progress on that.

21:06 - 21:52
Chris: I fully agree. This tension arises as soon as somebody starts their job as a faculty member at Legon or any other university in West Africa that I know of. There's a constant demand for consulting services and it pays pretty well. And for many people, that's exactly what they want to do. That's fine. I think the key is finding an institutional setting like this, or under a university leadership that is open to having world class scholarship being rewarded and finding individuals who want to do that.

And from my point of view, who would like to do it with me. And finding those matches is something that takes time, but it's incredibly rewarding.

21:52 - 22:08
Catherine: And we've talked about some of the opportunities for local partnerships as well as some of the challenges. Any final thoughts you want to share in terms of the approaches you're taking in your own research, or the approaches you hope to see to really move the needle on some of the issues you're working on.

22:08 - 22:47
Chris: We mentioned policy a little bit back, certainly in development economics, with a normative goal of helping policy improve and try to find ways of helping people get out of poverty. But I very rarely have specific policy recommendations. I view my work as more trying to support my local collaborators in providing them with the resources and the tools and maybe the authority to make recommendations to government. So I view myself as sort of a cheerleader or maybe a coach for the athletes who are going to do the real policy work.

22:47 - 24:06
Francis: Well, I think I'll suggest the more radical approach, which is trying to do actionable research. And that's a very complicated word in the sense that to do actionable research, which obviously means in conceiving the research question, you have policymakers at play. If policy is one of the key things you care about in conceiving the research question, you have potential users or regulators of this. And by this I mean it could be government regulators or even commercial providers. I think a lot of our work have always been around government, but I think there's a whole lot of private sector thinking, more commercial policy, right, which really, really matters incredibly.

And I would really encourage folks to think really hard about engaging commercial providers and policymakers more broadly, not only in terms of the dissemination and maybe use of the research, but actually conceiving the research questions, because this is really important in asking the question, how do you answer a momentum question that matters for people where policy will be built around? I'm sure people have tried this in many, many ways. The frictions are obviously going to be very different, and I think my colleagues can speak to that. But I think with a lot of careful thought and guidance about what is the right set of questions to answer within this context? What is the right set of engagements to have and what does it mean to use that evidence for policy, both government policy and commercial policy? We're going to make a lot of progress in development economics and doing what I call economics that matters.

24:06 - 25:46
Rohini: I think one thing I've been thinking about, and I don't know quite how to do it, but I do think it's a place where we should be doing more is engaging with how curricula and local universities happen. So one thing I see a lot in South Asia is if you come to university and you want to do development economics, so you want to do economics, you will do economics, but that's probably not going to help you, say, get into US graduate school. So for instance, if you're in India, probably if you went to an IIT, an engineering college, you're going to do much better at often getting into the next stage of economics careers.

And I think none of us spend a lot of time talking to university administrators or department administrators about what can be done there, or how one can be supportive and certainly I think in a lot of South Asia, there's been a lot of rise of private universities, which actually makes that, I think a little bit more feasible to do now than one did earlier. You know, I think we do a lot of substituting it. You know, we talk about online courses or, you know, things to come and do it, but it's different from substantively trying to figure out ways of actually working with leadership or university administrators in a way that I think we've thought a lot about how to work with researchers.

And I think if you really want to shape that generation of people going into college and how that affects the pipeline down, I think you're going to need to also work with those universities. And certainly in some settings, like in India, there's also very clearly ends up having a gender dimension. You know, women are going and doing economics, but they're perhaps going a little bit less to IITs. We want people who are interested in economics, and we need to figure out how to reach those universities as well.

25:46 - 25:53
Catherine: Rohini, Chris Francis, thank you so much for joining us.

Rohini: Thank you Catherine.

Chris: Thank you.

Francis: Thank you very much.

25:53 - 26:15
Catherine: That's all for this episode of Voices in Development. If you'd like to learn more about the Economic Growth Center, you can visit the website at EGC.Yale.edu, where you can also sign up for the newsletter. If you enjoy this episode, please share it and leave a rating and review and look for the next installment of Voices in Development on EGC’s website, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.