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Poverty researchers kick off three-year collaboration

By Susan Kelley

A vexing conundrum has the world's social scientists stymied: Chronic poverty continues to ravage such parts of the world as Africa and even America. But at the same time, more people than ever in other regions, such as East Asia, have dug their way out of poverty.

In the past 25 years, the standard of living for three-quarters of a billion East Asians has shot above the poverty line. "Never in human history have we seen this sort of rapid, broad-based, material improvement in living conditions," said Chris Barrett, the Stephen B. and Janice G. Ashley Professor of Applied Economics and Management. "It's really quite remarkable."

Yet the standard of living for sub-Saharan Africans stagnated during the same period. The number of people living in extreme poverty -- on \$1 a day or less -- has doubled, Barrett said.

Why does chronic poverty grind down citizens of both poor and wealthy societies? And what can be done to relieve it?

Barrett and a team of nine other Cornell scholars will explore such questions over the next two years. The team described the project April 22 at the Institute for the Social Sciences' (ISS) kickoff event for its Persistent Poverty and Upward Mobility theme project.

The project reinforces Cornell's globally recognized leadership in research to help reduce chronic poverty and malnutrition.

"Especially in these difficult times, I believe that colleges and universities can and must play a more central role in helping countries that are struggling to meet the needs of their citizens by developing human capacity and achieving enduring improvement of the standard of living at the local level, where it matters most," said President David J. Skorton at the event. "Projects like this one are a helpful step in this direction."

The project brings together professors with expertise ranging from government and nutritional sciences to labor economics and city and regional planning. The researchers hypothesize that the prevalence, depth and



Lindsay France/University Photography

Chris Barrett, center, talks with President David Skorton, left, and Ken Roberts, director of the Institute for the Social Sciences. Barrett is team leader of the 2008-11 Persistent Poverty and Upward Mobility theme project, sponsored by the ISS.

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persistence of poverty varies radically among groups that differ based on region, education, health, family status, race, ethnicity and gender. They believe that poverty and mobility experiences among different groups are analytically linked.

"Our project is founded on an important assumption: that these situations are related, that by studying one time and one people, we can have something to say about another, about present-day Tompkins County, for example," said Barrett, the team leader and director of Cornell's African Food Security and Natural Resources Management Program.

In 2009-10, the Persistent Poverty team will launch individual and collaborative research and conduct weekly seminars, public lectures, conferences and workshops, and offer the course Comparative Perspectives in Poverty Reduction Policy. The goal is to integrate theory, empirical measurement, causal inference and policy analysis around these issues, cutting across a variety of regions around the globe, Barrett said.

"None of us can do all of these things," he said. "This is one of the great virtues of a team That specialization in close proximity is going to make for a fun and exciting year."

For more about the project, see <http://www.socialsciences.cornell.edu/0811/desc.html>.

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