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Persistent poverty is focus of latest Institute for the Social Sciences theme project

By Franklin Crawford

In a world of unprecedented wealth, half of the planet's 6 billion people live on \$2 or less a day. This despite technological progress, international aid and other relief efforts to stimulate socio-economic advancement for those caught in poverty traps.

While social scientists have long researched the nature of persistent poverty and upward mobility in terms of economics, geopolitics and social development among other lines of inquiry, these veins are often tapped piecemeal and lack a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of poverty traps.



Provided

Cornell Professor Chris Barrett speaks with schoolchildren in a village in western Kenya in June 2007. Barrett's work often takes him to the most poverty-stricken areas of rural Africa.

That makes the Cornell Institute for the Social Sciences fourth theme project, "Persistent Poverty and Upward Mobility," a genuinely holistic undertaking.

"We hope to bring together a community of scholars and students keen to undertake comparative research on why some people remain poor for very long periods of time -- too often, indefinitely -- and others manage to exit from poverty," said project leader Christopher Barrett, the S.B. & J.G. Ashley Professor of applied economics and management. "We also seek to understand how the experience of poverty affects behaviors, which may influence the resulting paths people follow."

Four team members including Barrett are now on board for the project: Stephen Morgan, associate professor of sociology; Christine Olson, the H.E. Reed Human Ecology Extension Professor; and Jordan Matsudaira, assistant professor of policy analysis and management. By the end of the semester, project members plan to assemble a multidisciplinary core of 8-10 Cornell faculty members from across campus. ISS will host a public lecture in spring 2009, a weekly seminar series featuring prominent scholars from around the world in 2009-10, two major conferences (one each in fall 2009 and spring 2010), a public film series and photography exhibit across campus in 2009-2010, and outreach activities to be determined by the team in the coming months.

Morgan said he is excited to be working with Cornell colleagues on a long-term interdisciplinary project focused on the "vexing domestic and international social problem" of persistent poverty.

"I am equally excited by the opportunity to work on fundamental models of poverty and mobility that can inspire creative new strategies for poverty reduction," he said. "I believe that we have much to learn from

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each other and that we can be of service to the global fight against poverty while still indulging our egg-headed love of rigorous academic inquiry."

Olson brings her vast understanding of hunger and food insecurity to the project along with her "expertise in mixed methods approaches and longitudinal data analyses," she said. "My professional career at Cornell University has been devoted to understanding and promoting the nutritional well-being of women and children, subgroups of the population who are overrepresented among the poor in nearly every country of the world, including the United States," said Olson. "Many of the questions included in the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey that assesses, among other issues, the prevalence of food insecurity and hunger in the population were developed and validated by research from our group at Cornell."

Matsudaira will bring his expertise as a labor economist to bear on the effects of education, health and welfare policies on the behavior and well-being of vulnerable populations.

For more information about the project, visit the ISS Web site at <http://www.socialsciences.cornell.edu/>.

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