Profile

Sarah Baird: understanding, action, and optimism

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When Sarah Baird appears on my computer screen, things are not quite as expected. For one thing, while she is Professor of Global Health and Economics in the Department of Global Health of the Milken Institute School of Public Health at the George Washington University in Washington, DC, USA, she is speaking from New Zealand. For another, she has an American-sounding accent, but is wearing a Rugby World Cup top—not a sport usually associated with the USA. I ask about her background. "My parents are from New Zealand", Baird explains. "We just happened to grow up all over the world." She was born in India; her father worked for the World Bank and her mother was a potter. During her childhood the family moved to the USA, Indonesia, and briefly back to New Zealand. "I think my parents were kind enough to appreciate that staying in one place for high school was a nice thing", she says. "So I was in the Washington DC area for high school."

I wonder if she has blended the two parental influences of economist and artist in her life and career. "I think I probably have more of the economist bent and less of the creative than I would like", she replies. But during her own adolescence, Baird pursued the liberal arts, partly spurred by her mother's love of reading. Her interests included Shakespeare, Chaucer, and the jazz age. "It wasn't really till I was thinking 'What am I actually going to do after this liberal arts education?' that economics even crossed my mind." That early interest in the arts continues to inform her outlook. "I read academic research, but I also look to literature as a way to understand the world", she tells me, revealing that she is a member of a development economists' book club that reads and discusses fiction and non-fiction. And the more we talk about her career, the more it is clear that understanding both broad cultural factors and the shape of individual lives has been key to her success. "Economics is objective and math, but so much of it is then telling that story right, whether it's to a researcher or a policy maker", she says.

Baird's own narrative is an intriguing combination of personal drive and serendipity. After completing undergraduate studies in environmental science, economics, and policy at Claremont McKenna College, CA, USA, in 2001, her thoughts turned to the Peace Corps—but her then lack of US citizenship ruled that out. So Baird's drive "to do something useful in this world" led her to a masters and then a PhD in agriculture and resource economics at the University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA, which she completed in 2007. During this time, under the supervision of Edward Miguel, she travelled to Busia in Kenya to work at a field site as part of a deworming programme. "It was those 6 months in western Kenya that helped me, I think, connect what I was learning in the classroom to what was actually going on in the real world", says Baird. "I realised that what I really want to do is understand the causal impact of policies and programmes on people's lives, to try and really get solid evidence to then inform where we actually spend the money that we have."

Her desire to match understanding with action and impact informed subsequent work on the drivers of HIV among young women in Malawi, running a trial that showed the effectiveness of cash transfers in reducing infection rates. This fostered what she describes as "pretty much an entire career focused on young people", including investigation of a range of interventions such as cash transfers, psychotherapy, and changing social norms. For the past 3 years, she has served as Co-Chair of the second *Lancet* Commission on adolescent health and wellbeing. Its vision of a multidisciplinary adolescent health field that puts youth voices at its centre is, Baird tells me, a tribute to the work of the late George Patton, Chair of the first 2016 Commission: "I wouldn't be part of this Commission, or know any of the people on this Commission, if not for George." The new Commission builds on the earlier Commission, which was about "getting adolescents on the map", by focusing on actions and solutions and "diving a bit deeper into what it means to be an adolescent today, in terms of things like the online environment, urbanisation, conflict, climate", she explains. These are all tough topics, but Baird talks with optimism about her experience working on the Commission, especially the contribution of young people. She describes an exercise in which they thought about the future of today's adolescents. "I think all the younger people—which I no longer count myself in—were just much more optimistic and hopeful." It was the older generation, she realised "who were panicked and anxiety-driven, and putting our own fears on to young people". She summarises adolescent health as a complex time consisting of "opportunities and challenges". Ideally, this new Commission will help kick-start a process such that "people are living active, healthy lives", with a policy environment engaging young people and enabling "good access to nutrition, access to education, and health support systems". Any future commission, then, would go beyond this, "harnessing the power of young people in this changing world" to improve their lives still further.

Having discussed Baird's work, it is time to talk about the rugby. She is a major fan, with World Cups providing a meeting point for her family every 4 years. Otherwise, she spends her time in rural bliss in Garston, New Zealand, with her partner, two rescue sheep, and two rescue dogs. "Lots of good food, good wine, good coffee, and hiking and walking with the dogs is kind of the bottom line." Most economists know a thing or two about prices. Baird is one who also has a keen appreciation of values.

Niall Boyce