

Weekend links: development contractors, tracking aid, Ebola caregivers, school attendance, and Yemeni bureaucracy

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A new [article](#) in *Development and Change* offers a political economy analysis of development contractors and for-profit development companies. By unpacking the history and genealogy of contractors, and how they interface with US and UK development agencies as well as military and security firms, the piece raises a number of ethical and political questions about this understudied cast of development actors.

The most recent Tiny Spark [podcast](#) [21 mins] touches on related questions through its focus on tracking aid money – a quest which is (discouragingly) dubbed 'mission impossible'. The podcast includes interviews with the Center for Global Development's Vijaya Ramachandran, who has focused on tracking aid to Haiti following the 2010 earthquakes, and journalist Amy Maxmen, whose article on the under-compensation of health workers we featured in last weekend's [links](#).

The vulnerability of Ebola nurses and doctors is also the focus of Paul Farmer's sensitive essay, '[The Caregivers Disease](#)', in the London Review of Books. Farmer is well-known for his urgent critiques of poverty and inequality; here he embeds this argument within a reflection which incorporates insights recorded by Graham and Barbara Greene during their 1935 journey across West Africa. As far as the region's health systems are concerned, Farmer notes, too little has changed since then.

How to motivate children to attend school consistently is a challenge across much of the world. A recent field experiment that offered primary school students small incentives for attending school [found](#) [pdf] that the intervention had negative effects on attendance, academic performance, and motivation among students with low attendance at baseline. (See also Goats and Soda's reader-friendly summary [here](#)). Though the outcomes are depressing, they serve as an important reminder that when we experiment in development, we are actually experimenting with people's actual lives.

As an antidote to the previous link, another [study](#) [pdf] suggests that giving adolescent girls bicycles appears to help close the gender gap in secondary education in India by as much as 46%. The authors hypothesise that this is a consequence of the reduced time and increased safety offered by the bikes given as part of the Cycle program. You can also watch some handy videos with more info about the findings and methods through this Marginal Revolution [blog post](#).

Of course, some would (quite rightly) argue that even successful programs, like the Cycle program, have their limits in the grand scope of development. A [post](#) from the Roving Bandit blog this week presents a series of charts to show that, in the poorest countries, anti-poverty programmes are no substitute for national development, or for alternatives such as migration.

Finally, the conflict in Yemen continues apace. Now in control of much of Sanaa, the Houthis are proceeding to take on a perhaps unexpected task: straightening Yemen's crooked bureaucracy. This [essay](#), with accompanying audio, tells a detailed tale of where the Houthis have come from and what they are up to now.