

## Meet the IGIER Scholars

### Eliana La Ferrara



*You earned your undergraduate degree from Bocconi University and your PhD in economics from Harvard University. Who are the scholars who have made the most profound impact on the way you think as an economist, and why?*

During my studies I have had the privilege of interacting with scholars of exceptional quality, and many of them have shaped the way I think about economics. If I have to pick, two of the people from whom I have learnt the most are Abhijit Banerjee and Alberto Alesina.

Abhijit transmitted to me his passion for development research, and taught me how to integrate theory and empirical analysis, challenging modelling choices and econometric approaches with a depth of thinking and an ability to get to the essence of the problem which surprised me every time I talked to him as an advisor. From Alberto I learnt that a good economist also needs to have an “instinct” for interesting research questions, and for the right way of thinking about those. Choosing and developing research ideas in a way that makes them original and with the potential to have an impact is something I have learnt (and am still learning) through our joint work.

*What would be your comment to someone who may tell you: economic development (your field) is either boring or useless or both. “Get lost” is not among the acceptable comments to such a statement. I want you to provide an elegant and smart answer.*

Well, I would tell this person to go to a developing country, look around and think that three-fourths of the world’s population lives like that.

*I am interviewing you while you are visiting Rwanda. You are not an “armchair” economist. Rather, you spent and still spend time visiting developing countries for your research projects. Among the different experiences, which ones have left a permanent mark on you as a scholar and as a person?*

The experience that has changed me the most dates back to 1999, when I spent three months in the slums of Nairobi doing a survey of cooperatives and self-help groups. What left a mark were not only the hard living conditions, but also the hopelessness that I saw in some of the local development initiatives, including some of the groups I was interviewing.

*Your research is widely cited and in 2008 you also won one of the prestigious Starting Grants awarded by the European Research Council (ERC). Brava! Can you briefly describe what this research project is about?*

In the project “Conflict, Identity and Markets,” I investigate the roots of social and violent conflict from different points of view. One line of research examines the role of ethnic and cultural identity; another line looks at economic shocks and natural resource endowments from a microeconomic point of view; and the third component of the project considers the role of international actors and institutional arrangements for conflict prevention. The common thread is the attempt to incorporate social and institutional variables in the economic analysis of conflict, from a micro perspective.

*Suppose tomorrow you meet a group of Bocconi students (or even your children) who want to enter academia and become development economists. What advice would you give them?*

I would advise them to spend some time in a developing country. When you visit a place you often become aware of aspects of the problem that you did not even imagine. And the best research ideas may come from these “serendipitous” discoveries.

*In an imaginary trip back in time, you can choose to be: Jeanne d’Arc, Caterina de Medici, Marie Curie, or Greta Garbo. Which one would you like to be?*

Jeanne d’Arc, though I know she’s the most controversial... But she was brave.

*You studied piano in high school. Do you still play?*

I wish I still played... my piano keys are covered in dust. But I like to entertain the irrational expectation that one day I will pick it up again!

*(Milano, November 25, 2010)*