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Thursday, 17 January 2019

Dear Dietrich,

I am writing about your manuscript, MS-9485 "The Role of Land in Temperate and Tropical Agriculture," that you submitted for publication in the *Journal of the European Economic Association* on November 27th 2018.

I have now heard back from four trusted and expert referees on your manuscript: both are well familiar with the related literature on the causes and consequences of agricultural productivity, and wider implications for structural change and economic development. One of them (R2) previously reviewed your paper at the *Economic Journal*, but has prepared a new report based on this version of the paper (and they recognize the improvements made to the paper over submissions).

As you would expect, the referees are all highly sympathetic to your research agenda, and none of them needs convincing that you are addressing an important question on the origins of comparative development, that is of general interest. However, despite these positives, the news is not altogether good as all referees raise first order concerns with the analysis conducted, and the majority remain unconvinced that the core analysis reaches the threshold for *JEEA*, that aims to establish itself as a top-6 general interest journal.

These are clearly expressed in each report, but relate to the core of the paper in terms of the assumption of factor mobility that underpins identification (this goes against the body of evidence on the misallocation of factors in low-income settings, and the concern is not fully ameliorated by the results in Appendix A3 – see R1 and R4 on this point especially), the additional assumption on agricultural and non-agricultural goods being substitutes (which also goes against a body of work and so needs to be justified more fully), the lack of supportive evidence for a range of other important assumptions made (see R2's report), and on the determination of wages in the model. Beyond the issues related to production function estimation in the cross section (I agree with R4 that the panel estimates are somewhat more inconclusive given the limited sample), I share R2's concern on the lack of discussion of prices (taxes and subsidies on crops), and how that might lead to OVB.

Also, as you can imagine for this kind of exercise, there are going to be data issues concerns (although all of these could be addressed) – such as on the measurement of productivity from the FAO data, and population measurement from the HYDE data.

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Overall, R1 and R4 recommend rejection, R2 is on the fence (but would reject if JEEA aims to become a top-6 journal). R3 is the most positive referee suggesting a revise and resubmit, but you can see from his/her report, they remain unconvinced on the empirical findings, and in their cover letter to me suggest, "I'm not fully convinced by their approach, and the focus of my report is on the doubts I have regarding their methodology."

I have now read your paper with interest. Putting aside these bottom line recommendations, I do find myself in agreement with the substantive comments raised on identification. Although I like the question, I don't see sufficient grounds on which to overrule the majority of referees. I must therefore reject your manuscript for *JEEA*. My sense is that a suitably revised version of your paper could be a better match for a lower-tier and more macro-specialized journal, such as the *JEG* or *AEJ: Macro*.

We now receive close to 1000 annual submissions and can only publish 50 papers or so across all fields. You will thus appreciate that the acceptance rate at *JEEA* is less than 5%. For applied papers, I can only see a path for publication for papers that make significant contributions to existing empirical work, irrespective of how clean their identification is. Your paper falls short of what the *JEEA* threshold is, as we aim to become established a top-6 general interest journal.

Although I understand you will be disappointed with this rejection, I hope this particular negative outcome does not discourage you from submitting your work to *JEEA* in the future. I hope you appreciate the relatively quick turnaround and the many constructive comments on your work provided by all four referees, and although the outcome is not one that you would have wanted, you view the process as constructive and useful for your work in future.

Yours sincerely,



Imran Rasul.

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