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Dear Recruitment Committee:

I am delighted to write in support of **A. Nilesch Fernando**, a Ph.D. candidate in public policy from Harvard University, who is on the job market this year. I have interacted regularly with Nilesch ever since he was a top-notch and engaging student in my Ph.D. labor economics course, and I currently serve as one of his dissertation advisors.

Nilesch Fernando is a bright, articulate, energetic, and talented applied microeconomist with an integrated set of research interests spanning development economics, labor economics, and agricultural economics. He is a lively and interactive scholar who is a self-starter with the technical tools and intellectual breadth to make significant advances on important and policy-relevant research topics in development economics. Nilesch has extensive field experience developing, implementing, and analyzing some creative randomized control trials (RCTs) in rural India to examine the impacts of mobile phone-based agricultural extension services on agricultural decisions and productivity. And Nilesch does a nice job of combining appropriate economic models, detailed historical and institutional knowledge, and credible non-experimental identification strategies to make progress on understanding how key institutional and cultural factors (such as land inheritance customs) impact on economic development. Nilesch already is a prolific young scholar with many research ideas and promising projects in the works. He is clearly among the stronger students in development economics and related fields on the job market in recent years.

The centerpiece of Nilesch's dissertation research is his impressive and serious job market paper examining the long-term effects of inherited land on credit access, occupational choice, and economic well-being for males in rural India. Nilesch hypothesizes that productive assets (such as inherited agricultural land in rural India) that come with "strings attached" (cultural obligations) and significant transaction costs (to sell or have others operate and maintain) may be a mixed blessing in rural development settings. Inherited land can lead to better credit access but at the same time could potentially restrict labor mobility and occupational choice in a manner that could end up being costly in setting with large urban-rural and nonagricultural-agricultural wage differentials. He exploits the interaction of sibling sex composition (holding the total number of sibling constant) with Hindu inheritance customs that favor sons to generate plausibly exogenous variation in inherited land. He uses this variation to estimate the causal impacts on

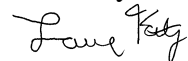
inherited land on a range of economic outcomes. Nilesh finds that inheriting more land increases credit access and tends to raise consumption. But he also finds that the effect on household consumption is attenuated (and may even turn negative for some sub-groups) when cultural family obligations and land market transaction costs are substantial. Land inheritance also tends to reduce rural-urban migration and shifts to nonagricultural occupations. Nilesh does some useful placebo exercises to validate his instrument of sibling sex composition showing it does not have similar impacts in areas with different inheritance customs. This is first-rate, thoughtful, and careful work suggesting that family cultural obligations and land market imperfections may play a role in limiting movements out of agriculture and rural even when such occupational and geographic mobility appear to generate substantial economic returns.

Nilesh has completed a very fine joint paper with Shawn Cole evaluating a randomized field experiment to examine the impact of mobile-phone based agricultural extension – the agricultural consulting service Avaaj Otalo (AO) – for cotton farmers in Gujarat, India. This clever RCT tries to examine the importance of agricultural “managerial practices” and technology adoption decisions in explaining huge heterogeneity in agricultural productivity across farms. Nilesh finds substantial demand by farmers for agricultural advice (with 80 percent of treatment farmers calling into the AO line over two years). Fernando and Cole document substantial impacts of access to AO advice on agricultural managerial decisions leading to what appear to be more appropriate input choices related to irrigation, pesticide and fertilizer and increased yields. They further present evidence of spillovers to the peers of treated farmers in terms of better agricultural decisions. The other striking finding appears to be that advice from AO affects agricultural decisions and productivity without having measurable impacts on tests of agricultural knowledge except for the more educated farmers. Nilesh (along with Shawn Cole and Hee Kwon Seo) is far along in a follow-up and larger scale cluster randomized experiment to further explore how agricultural extension advice impacts on agricultural technology adoption both directly and through peer spillover effects.

I also should note that Nilesh has many other promising projects both in progress and in planning stages including a creative historical observational study of the ethnic biases of umpiring panels in cricket matches, an analysis of farmer suicides and health impacts of Green Revolution pesticide usage in rural India (with Supreet Kaur), several new RCTs, and intriguing ideas related to status signaling behavior in India.

In summary, A. Nilesh Fernando is an engaging, creative, and insightful young social scientist with the potential to become a first-rate scholar in development economics and applied microeconomics. He has a strong track record as a teaching fellow in development courses for undergraduates at Harvard College and executive education students. And he has excellent field research skills and data analytic tools. I can wholeheartedly and enthusiastically recommend Nilesh Fernando to you. He would be a great asset to your department, school, or organization.

Sincerely,



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