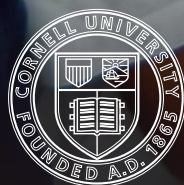
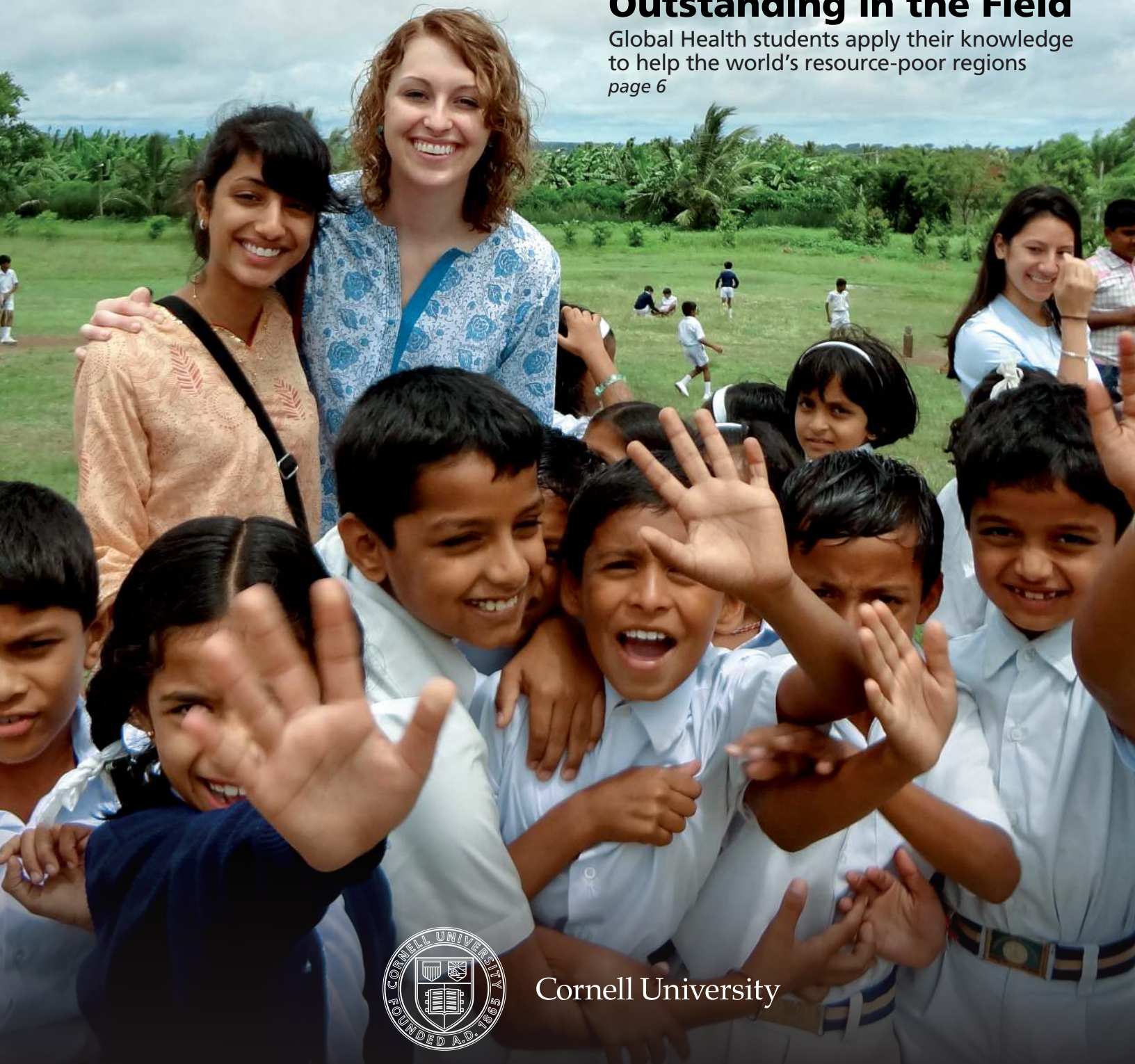


Human ECOLOGY

College of Human Ecology, Cornell University
Volume 42, Number 1 • Spring 2014

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Hyuncheol Kim consults with his HIV testing project field director Kasahun Mengistu during a visit to Hetosa, Ethiopia. Photo provided.

The Social Doctor

Hyuncheol Kim aims to alleviate poverty and improve health in developing countries

BY OLIVIA M. HALL

With degrees in medicine, public health, and economics, Hyuncheol “Bryant” Kim considers himself a “social doctor,” going beyond patient care to address the socioeconomic causes of disease.

Living around the globe has inspired Kim’s research. In his twenties, he backpacked through Europe, Africa, and Asia before returning to his native Korea, where he worked as a night ER doctor and fulfilled his mandatory three-year service as a public health physician in the country’s Ministry of Health and Welfare. During those years, Kim closely witnessed poverty and its effects, both in Korea and in several developing countries, including Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines.

At his clerkship at a Korean breast cancer clinic, he noticed that wealthier patients came to the hospital at earlier stages of disease, while poorer patients often did not visit until they were terminally ill. “I felt this was unfair,” said Kim, the Lois and Mel Tukman Assistant Professor in the Department of Policy Analysis and Management. “As an economist now, it’s too obvious, but at the time I had no idea about socioeconomic determinants of diseases.”

That realization spurred him to pursue a PhD in economics at Columbia, where he completed his studies in 2013. “As a medical doctor, I could help patients individually,” Kim said. “But working at the Ministry of Health, I found that public policy has a huge impact on the quality of life of the population, so I wanted to be a social doctor instead.”

Currently, his research focuses on public health initiatives in Malawi and Ethiopia, projects he started during his doctoral program. Both apply alternative approaches to support individual and family health and to divert young people from health outcomes associated with poverty.

In Malawi, working in collaboration with Daeyang Luke Hospital, Kim initiated an HIV/AIDS program targeting

secondary school children. It offers scholarships and stipends to female students, who might otherwise resort to prostitution to pay for school. The program also encourages circumcision for boys, which has been shown to reduce male HIV infection by as much as 50 percent. “We figured out that if the procedure is offered to a group of friends, or circumcision is offered with HIV education, boys are more likely to come to the clinic,” Kim said.

Both approaches have succeeded—though that’s not always the case. In another study of maternal health in rural Malawi, Kim found that a standard package of food, malaria nets, vaccinations, and greater access to prenatal care had a limited impact on improving the health of mothers and infants. Kim suspects that the treatments didn’t go far enough, and he’s planning to make them more comprehensive for the project’s next phase.

In urban areas of Ethiopia, such health and nutrition packages don’t work well, Kim said, so he is testing programs that emphasize women’s employment status and family planning. For instance, Kim and collaborators plan to run a randomized control trial that helps women access family planning services and jobs. Partnering with factory owners, the project will subsidize 20 percent of the women’s wages and provide transportation to health care clinics for family planning. As the study expands, Kim expects all 2,000 participants to receive treatment and work opportunities.

“In developing countries, women are typically the most distressed and poor people,” said Kim. “But not much is known about the consequences of increasing their participation in the labor market and family planning services.”

Kim said that his research is inspired by his life, academic training, and observations of health disparities in some of the world’s poorest countries. “I am passionate about my research, because I believe it will help improve the quality of life of the poor and distressed.” • • •

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Discover more

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