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## Zero-Sum Environments, the Evolution of Effort-Suppressing Beliefs, and Economic Development

abstract:

We study the evolution of belief systems that suppress productive effort, such as beliefs about envy, witchcraft, the importance of luck for success, or disdain for competitive effort. In our framework, demotivating beliefs evolve when interactions are zero-sum, i.e., where one person's gain comes at others' expense. They improve material welfare but reduce subjective well-being. The model delivers testable predictions about the relationship between the degree of zero-sumness, demotivating beliefs, material welfare, subjective well-being, and long-run economic development. We find that the predictions are supported by data from two samples in the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as global evidence from the World Values Survey and the European Values Study.