

## Bridging: Dan Rogger

A World Bank research manager on the tensions that arise in bridging research and policy in economics

### The author

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So much of public policy is shaped in public administration. The legal and political architecture of the state will always serve as only a coarse guide to those tasked with implementing policy. In practice, a diverse array of decisions made within government administration fundamentally defines how policy works.

My perspective has been developed through experience trying to navigate the bridge between research and policy, foremost in international development, and in public policy work more broadly. Upon leaving UCL and Cambridge as an eager young economist, a first posting in Nigeria as an Overseas Development Institute Fellow offered a humbling lesson. Countless economics courses had laid out clear policy options, but the reality was different: it was not what the government tried to implement, but how, that determined public policy outcomes. In many realms

of economic policy since then, I have found it is the implementing institutions that profoundly shape what actually happens.

Such a perspective has driven my choices about how to try to influence policy, both through my career direction and research focus. Working inside – and trying to reshape – the machinery of administration offers perhaps the most direct route to influencing policy. The administration I work in is the World Bank's Development Impact Department of the Development Economics Vice Presidency. My role combines direct support to World Bank programmes and policies with broader research on institutional themes.

Unlike many, I feel genuine excitement at being a middle manager. Recent evidence (Dal Bó et al. 2021, Fenizia 2022, Best et al. 2023) shows that middle managers can exert a tangible impact on the quality of public policy carried out under their pur-



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### Further reading

Besley, T., Burgess, R., Khan, A. and Xu, G. (2022). Bureaucracy and development. *Annual Review of Economics*, 14, 397-424.

Best, M. C., Hjort, J. and Szakonyi, D. (2023). Individuals and organizations as sources of state effectiveness. *American Economic Review*, 113(8), 2121-67.

Dal Bó, E., Finan, F., Li, N. Y. and Schechter, L. (2021). Information technology and government decentralization: Experimental evidence from Paraguay. *Econometrica*, 89(2), 677-701.

Fenizia, A. (2022). Managers and productivity in the public sector. *Econometrica*, 90(3), 1063-1084.

Finan, F., Olken, B. A. and Pande, R. (2017). The personnel economics of the developing state. In Banerjee, A. V. and Duflo, E. (eds.) *Handbook of Economic Field Experiments*, Volume 2, North-Holland.

For a contemporary description of government administrations, see the *Global Survey of Public Servants*, <https://www.globalsurveyofpublicservants.org/>.

Perhaps the book in this field that I have heard economists rave about most is James Q. Wilson's *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*. Guo Xu and co-editors' *VoxDevLit* is available at <https://voxdev.org/voxdevlit/bureaucracy> and a summary of my approach to working in public administration is available at <https://voxdev.org/topic/public-economics/how-government-analytics-can-improve-public-sector-implementation>

view. Those 'in the machine' can support and positively influence colleagues and staff. While the ability to influence varies enormously across the policy space we work in, I feel much more able to change policy when I am deeply engaged with an administration.

Without some form of engagement, it is unlikely policymakers will ever pick up your recipe book, however tasty the dish. Though there are high-profile exceptions, the median decision in government administration is untouched by external research. The emphasis of contemporary economics research focuses squarely on recipes and spends far less time negotiating the average kitchen.

How to help public officials strengthen the *de facto* policymaking process remains far from obvious. The economics profession has fortunately begun to take government administration more seriously as a research subject (Finan et al. 2017, Besley et al. 2022). Still, guidance on how to collaborate with counterparts, and what advice to give them daily on each step of implementation, remains limited, leaving open questions such as, 'What's the right wage schedule for a specific public ser-

vice grade?' and 'What projects should be prioritised for the next budget disbursement?'

Where does one begin? The economics research I was trained in demands causal identification. Yet what I found most demand for in the World Bank and governments around the world has been a richer descriptive understanding of the environments in which government officials operate. This naturally leads to work that produces large-scale descriptions of government administration, such as the *Global Survey of Public Servants*, and *Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators*. Operating within a department and profession that prize causal inference has meant I felt a distinct tension around these descriptive investments.

These tensions naturally give rise to uncertainty. I remain concerned by how little we truly understand about the workings of public administration, both in terms of its underlying context and the causal evidence on the incentives that shape public servants' behaviour. These topics remain largely unexplored in economic theory and empirics. Yet if this is where much public policy is actually made, how rigorous is the economics profes-

sion's model of how its practices influence public policy?

Taking public servants as central to public policy naturally implies variation in the implementation of any specific government policy. Facing that fact implies a role for better measurement of the machinery of government, tools that help public officials themselves respond to where they are in that diversity, and causal research that takes government administration as a significant mediator of policy effectiveness. If economists had a broad toolkit that confronted these issues head-on, we would be in a far stronger position to strengthen public policy.

### About the author

Daniel Rogger is a Research Manager at the World Bank's Development Impact Department. He was a 2012-3 RES Junior Fellow during his PhD in Economics at UCL and a PhD Scholar at the IFS. His website is [danrogger.com](http://danrogger.com)