

Valuable Conversations Podcast - Kate Roll

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SPEAKERS

Kate Roll, Justin Beiroid, Elisa Cadelli

Justin 00:02

Hello, and welcome to Valuable Conversations, a student produced podcast from the Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP) at University College London (UCL). I'm Justin Beiroid.

Elisa 00:11

And I'm Elisa Cadelli. We are both students pursuing a Master of Public Administration in Innovation, Public Policy and Public Value.

Justin 00:21

IIPP was founded by Professor Mariana Mazzucato. And the core idea behind what we do is to revive notions of public value and public purpose and bring them to the center of political economy and policy practice. So just tell you a little bit about us. I'm from Los Angeles, California, and I'm really interested in the political economy of technology. And I was drawn to IIPP for its unique approach to rethinking capitalism, and the state, and innovation.

Elisa 00:52

And I'm from Zurich, Switzerland. I have a background in international relations. I'm particularly interested in tackling grand challenges of our time, such as global poverty or the environmental crisis. IIPP offers an innovative solution with state-led missions that take a participatory and equitable approach in providing long term public value. So today, we're specifically, and especially, excited to welcome Professor Kate Roll. Kate was our lecturer during the first term in the class 'Grand Challenges and System's Change', where we examine how public and policymakers tackle societal, grand challenges through the angle of the policy cycle and systems thinking.

Justin 01:29

Right. One thing that I really loved about Kate's class is that she manages to balance being extremely critical, while also still being, kind of, productive or useful. Kate's class was literally about the world's most devastating and intractable and so called wicked problems on Earth. And yet her class was not depressing, as you might expect it to be. There is a lot of classes I've taken on those subjects, and you know, is basically saying there's no easy answers. But that doesn't mean there's nothing we can do.

Elisa 02:06

Absolutely. And he manages to put very complex phenomena into something very tangible and concrete. And she's also good at storytelling, where you end up having her voice in my head when

writing the assignments, because I remembered what she said so well, which was actually very handy as a student.

Justin 02:25

Yeah, totally. Kate really is a fantastic teacher. I think she really cares about her students and wants to help people think differently, and be curious about the world. So that's why Kate was just a must have guest on the podcast for me.

Elisa 02:44

Absolutely. She definitely stood out as a highly motivated and dynamic teacher. And that's why we're so excited to actually have that conversation with her. It was super interesting. And it was just nice to get to know more about her as a person, but also about her work. So we jump in just to talk a bit about her and kind of her background as an intro.

Justin 03:05

Yeah, so Dr. Kate Role is a political scientist who currently serves as Assistant Professor in Innovation, Development, and Public Purpose, and the Head of Teaching at UCL IIPP. And she's the Bartlett school's faculty lead for public policy. Prior to joining IIPP, she was based at the University of Oxford, where she still teaches and was a faculty member in the Saïd Business School contributing to strategy and innovation curriculum. She ran the mutuality and business project, a large multi-year research partnership on responsible business.

Elisa 03:30

Her multidisciplinary work brings together politics and policy, business ethics, and development studies. She focuses on one stream of research that is about power and vulnerability, with a particular interest on how people in poverty, and following conflict, bring greater access to become security. Within this stream, she wrote her doctoral thesis on the politics of benefits programs for former combatants in Timor Leste. We're actually going to talk about that quite a bit in this podcast. Dr. Roll's second research focus critically engages with private sector approaches to development, particularly based on the pyramid route to market programs. As part of this work, she co-leads a randomized control trial investigating the impact of greater risk sharing in microfinance contracts in Kenya. She's currently developing a new stream of research, which will extend her work on private sector approaches, development by critically examining the emergence of social innovation and technology for good. We hope you enjoyed this conversation.

Justin 04:42

All right, Professor Kate Roll, welcome to the podcast!

Kate 04:45

Thanks so much!

Elisa 04:46

I'm going to start off with quite a big question. You're happy to go as broad or as narrow as you'd like. Can you give us a brief rundown of your research. And most importantly, what's something that people who are not familiar with you should know about your work?

Kate 05:03

Thanks guys so much. It's really fun to do this kind of thing. So my work is eclectic. I've worked across a lot of different fields and a lot of different departments. So I always sort of struggle with this question. So maybe I'll sort of tell it biographically because in some ways it makes more sense that way than doing it in other ways. I started out, my undergrad was in international relations with a real interest in global security. And why and how I gotten interested in that is maybe another question for another time. But I really realized at that point that I was reading a lot about conflict, but didn't know that much about it. And that's when I went and worked in East Timor (Timor Leste) for a few years, which is something we can we can talk about. That set me off to do work in development studies and my doctorate in politics, which focused on post conflict, reconstruction, and particularly disarmament and demobilization (RDD). So which I'd call sort of who gets what after war, which is a sort of a really interesting political economy question of how resources are distributed, and why. Who can make claims to the post-conflict economy. And so I did that work. I did sort of a master's thesis on that work at Oxford. And then I had an interview to get a scholarship for my doctoral thesis, which expanded that work. On my panel was a wonderful scholar named Catherine Dolan, (Professor Catherine Dolan, SOAS University of London) who works on corporations in low income settings. And after the interview for the scholarship, which was successful, which was awesome, called my grandmother; said I got funding for my PhD, Catherine wrote me a letter saying, "do you know anyone who might want to work as a research assistant on this project that I'm running around low income sellers in Kenya and in different parts of East Africa?" And I wrote this whole letter recommending my friend, Nelson. Then I remembered something that I'd read that day about one reason why women aren't succeeding is because they don't put themselves forward for roles. So I added a very small line at the end of the email saying, and I'm also available. And so she hired me! So in parallel to my thesis work, which was all on post conflict, reconstruction, and in DDR, I was working for Catherine on this work around low income selling and corporations working in low income countries. And so those ran in parallel. Then when I finished my doctorate, I continued that work with Catherine at the business school. So that sort of was how I ended up with that. But I think they're connected in the sense that they both have a grounding in development studies. So a concern about vulnerability and risk is something I write about in almost all my papers. Who has power? Who has risk? Who decides who gets what? You know, these are distributional questions. And so that's sort of been my two big pillars. Then at IIPP, I do some work on taxation and SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), again, grounded in concern with vulnerability and sustainability. And then I teach and do work around tech and ethics and impact. But again, grounded primarily in low income countries, concerns around tech and development, tech and poverty, and tech and peace. So yeah, lots of different areas! But those were sort of my two big strains.

Justin 09:08

That's great! And you made a comment where you said, how I got into it is for another time. And actually, part of the point of this podcast is for those kinds of things. So if you don't mind, take a step back. But thank you so much for that overview, and we'll go into some of those details. I guess I

wanted to ask a few questions about how you did get into this field. So first of all, where do you grew up, Kate?

Kate 09:36

So I grew up in Arlington, Massachusetts. Sort of the suburbs of Boston are really, more correctly the suburbs of Cambridge, Massachusetts. My father was a graphic designer working in Harvard Square. My Mom is an Art Conservator who had worked for the Harvard Art Museums, but then had her practice as a lab in our attic when I was growing up, which was pretty cool. So yeah, for those who couldn't afford to live in Cambridge, Massachusetts anymore, they moved to Arlington. And Arlington was very uncool when I was growing up. But, now it has a 'Whole Foods', which suggests that it's now a very hip place to be. But that was 'Johnny's Food Master' when I was there, so not so hip at the time.

Justin 10:19

So because your parents worked there, were you like, absolutely not going to go to Harvard? Or it was it not like that?

Kate 10:27

No, well, I think I wanted to stretch my wings a little bit, because Cambridge has always been sort of the backyard. I'm sure if I had applied and been accepted, I would have probably considered it. But, I ended up a little bit farther south at Brown, which was a great, great place for me.

Justin 10:49

Right. So how early on did you get into academic stuff? And when did you start to get interested in the political science and conflict studies things?

Kate 11:01

It's a great question. So I think there was always newspapers around my house, stuff like that. My Dad would watch sort of 'News Hour' or this kind of thing. Which sort of ambience. But, also we watch a lot of 'Star Trek' and all that stuff too. So it's sort of political in its own way. Then I went to a really wonderful high school that had a history professor who was retiring. And one of the last things he did was do a special seminar on the 2000 elections. This was this was Bush v. Gore. So a really interesting election in US history. I was too young to even vote. But, he had all of us volunteer on campaigns, write reports on various things. And then it was the year of the election. So it was it's extremely exciting. Almost all of us from that class, think there's only eight of us, have ended up either lawyers working in the US Senate, running politics based NGOs, teaching politics, studying politics. So we selected ourselves in so there's a selection bias already who took Bill Bailey's course. But all of us have really gone in that direction.

Justin 12:28

That's so interesting. Is that part of where you decided that you wanted to be a teacher too?

Kate 12:34

Yeah, it's interesting. Maybe I shouldn't sort of reverse engineer my story too much, because, the other twist was that I had thought I was going to be a scientist. So I loved the politics class. But it was a

situation where I was a girl who was doing well, and I took lots of AP sciences. I was pushing myself in math. I want to be the girl who's doing the hard stuff. I was sort of, not naturally that good probably. I was probably much better in the politics and history stuff. It was like, "Oh, I've got to push myself in the sciences". When I got accepted to university, I took a year out where I went and worked. I was an apprentice on a boat in Indonesia and New Guinea. And sort of had this wild year with a bunch of people who were trying to reinvent society. So I had the sort of my suburban Massachusetts mind blown during that year. But it also meant that my sister had to choose my courses for my first year of undergrad. My older sister.

Justin 13:43

Wow, what could go wrong!

Kate 13:46

So I thought, "oh, she'll sign me up for science courses. She'll sign me up for pre-med. You know, I'm a smart person, I'm going to pick the hard stuff." And instead of putting me in pre-med, she put me in medical anthropology. Which is like the smartest thing she could have done. It was so wild and wonderful!

Elisa 14:07

Because they knew better what to do for you.

Kate 14:09

Exactly! Because the whole point of medical anthropology is why do doctors wear white coats? What's the power here? How do doctors think about patients that they don't understand? How do different cultures think about medicine? So I had this various intense high school experience, you know, high performing young woman, blah, blah, blah. And then went off to have my mind blown in Indonesia and came back to an anthropology course, and had seen all this really cool stuff. Where I had been people, smuggling cigarettes across borders, and dugout canoes, and all this kind of stuff. So I really had a much more expansive view of the world. When I came back I was reading all this medical anthropology which sort of demystified a lot of the status that I think I'd been interested in with science and medicine. And that allowed me to take, you know, I was taking Icelandic saga and botany. That's a good thing about US undergrads, you can take all this kind of stuff. And then a lot of international relations.

Justin 15:21

Have you always been just a voracious reader? I was talking to my classmate, Nicko, the other day, and he's from Chile. And we were talking about how when I've read your writing, it's always, like, so many citations. After almost every sentence, there's two or three citations. And it makes me realize how little I know about the topic, but in a good way, like, I know where to go now. And Nikko told me this word in Spanish that I had not heard called 'ratón de biblioteca', which means the mouse that lives in the library. And that's what you would call people like that, who just seemed to have read every single thing. I know, you haven't read everything. But have you always been like that? Or is that kind of your training kicking in?

Kate 16:09

It's a good question. I think I've always had sort of good stamina for reading. In grad school, I remember just the amount of reading being huge. Just printing out articles and having them in my backpack. And anytime I was sat on a bench reading it.

Justin 16:30

Well thank you for paying it forward and giving us a huge amount of reading too.

Kate 16:37

That is the apprenticeship system of academia. So yeah, loads and loads of reading. I remember starting undergrad having come out of this year, where I was working on the boat, and thinking that "isn't this amazing that this is my job to read". And so really having this real mind shift. In high school, I think particularly in competitive high schools, you're just working so hard, and you're sort of working for these goals. And you come to have this sort of mindset of, "oh, I get to sit on this lawn all day, and just read. And reading and understanding is the purpose of me being here". I remember that feeling amazing, like a real privilege. And I think those are still some of my happiest moments in academia, where you sort of say, "oh, I'm just gonna spend all day trying to figure this out and reading interesting things". I've had mentors who really recommend reading a lot outside of your field. I read some novels and things like that. But I read The New Yorker almost every night. And so you're reading about all different kinds of stuff. And I find that really stimulating.

Elisa 17:54

That's fascinating. You said that you went to Brown for your undergrad. But you then ended up in the UK. You came to Oxford for your masters and your PhD. Why did you choose the UK, and specifically Oxford?

Kate 18:09

Yeah, there's sort of a few different ways of telling that story. After finishing undergrad, I got what's called a Princeton and Asia Fellowship, which solves that problem of you can't get experience without experience, which I'm sure you guys even ending a master's program can feel sometimes. And so it sort of vouches for students, and says you should take this person even though they've never done this before. I ended up in East Timor, working for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, working on the first set of elections that Timor ran for itself. So an extremely exciting time. Really, really cool moment to be in that country. I was there for two and a half years, and then maybe a year on top of that afterwards. I think I found this time were extremely stimulating, interesting. And also really tiring in its own way. You're living in a place that's extremely poor, one of the poorest in Southeast Asia. You know, post conflict, or sort of people would joke, priek post conflict. I'm a six foot tall white lady. You're just very constantly sort of in the in the spotlight. And so I wanted to sort of step out from that and think about what was next. My first thought was, I'd go to law school. So I said, "I'm going to prepare for my LSAT (Law School Admission Test), and I'll give myself three weeks to prepare for LSATs", which really no one should do that, because it doesn't take three weeks to prepare for LSAT. So I got myself a book and I took the test in Darwin, in Australia, and I didn't do that well, right! Because you can't prepare for LSAT in three weeks. And so "oh s***!". You know, as I'm not going to be a lawyer, at least not going to be a lawyer after three weeks of prep. So I thought well what do I

want to do? It was a good time for me to go to grad school as well, because you hit sort of a ceiling, where you need another credential to move forward, particularly in NGOs. So, there were sort of the really strategic side of the story is I didn't want to do more testing. If I went to a UK university, then I wouldn't have to do the GRE (Graduate Record Examination), having just had that LSAT experience. So there's part of it that was that.

Justin 20:37

That applied to me as well, actually!

Kate 20:39

Right! It's not a very flattering story to say I was scared of taking more standardized tests after being burned on the LSAT. But, you know, we're all human. I think there's also a sense of, you know, I had a slightly complicated home life, so I didn't really want to be right back in the States. I'd gone basically as far away as you could go by going to East Timor and think, "okay, I'll go from thirteen hours to five hours, in terms of timezone difference".

Justin 21:12

I wanted to ask, did you go back to Timor Leste for your PhD?

Kate 21:18

Yeah, I went back a few times.

Justin 21:21

Okay, so we want to ask you about that in a minute. But, if we could put that aside for just a second. I wanted to ask; at what point did you start to doubt the mainstream approach to political science and start to think more about heterodox and multidisciplinary approaches, and the concept, that you mentioned a second ago that, that you really are limiting yourself if you only stick to your field, and you got to read economics and anthropology and sociology. When did you start to have that realization?

Kate 21:27

I don't think political science is as bound by orthodoxy as economics is. I don't think there's sort of the same classical/neoclassical split. Or not quite so much. In my training is sort of, I have two sets of training. One is the empirical politics, primarily from Oxford, and the other is international relations theory from Brown. Brown really was in this sort of Aberystwyth school, for those familiar, or more constructivist (social constructivism etc) approaches. So they were already on the using ideas of language, norms, power, Foucault, all of that was very much influenced how they were teaching international relations. And so it was much more in sync with how European universities do political science. There's a big shift in US universities, I think, in recent decades towards much more quantitative approaches to political science. So maybe that's where we see some sort of Europe, US splits. But Brown was already much more in that constructivist school. And so my training and my thinking very much comes up with those ideas.

Elisa 23:28

You sort of ended up in IIPP, which is also very known for rethinking the state and interactions between all sorts of stakeholders. You're an assistant professor there now, when you're still teaching at Oxford, Saïd Business School. How did you start up getting interested into innovation as a concept, or a research, and public purpose in general and value? Okay, a completely different term, right?

Kate 24:09

Yeah, I remember seeing the advert for this position that I'm in. So, development, purpose and value are sort of the three; I've got a very long title. And I went, "Wow, this is this is fantastic, because these are the three things I've been working on, but across three different departments". So at Oxford I did my master's in international development studies that very much, again, influenced theories that I use and parts of the world that I'm very interested in. And then innovation I've been doing my my postdoc at the business school. I'd started working on some of this tech for good and innovation work primarily through my teaching. Also, just because it's it's so interesting, right? It's so fun. And then had been finding this gap where people, particularly when I first started working at the business school and teaching on these issues, were either uncomfortable or weren't really thinking about ideas of impact ethics; to what extent power; all of these questions that I that I really loved. And that really came out of a lot of critical development studies, post colonial thought. All of that I wasn't seeing brought over to the business school. So sort of that purpose, value, ethics side. So it was really cool to see these things all in one title. And so that was really wonderful. Yeah, so I sat through this is great place to synthesize strains that had been spread out.

Justin 25:44

One thing that I learned a lot about in your class that I was never exposed to before, and I did my undergrad in political economy, was the systems thinking. It's obviously had a huge impact on the way that I think about things now. And I'm curious, when did you start to get interested in that and combining that with your other stuff that you do?

Kate 26:08

Yeah, this sort of systems thinking and systems change. It's always been a funny concept for me in the sense that I think political scientists already think a lot about systems. If you're thinking about world systems theory, that saying that resources and countries, we need to be thinking on this supranational level, that's very much a systems concept. Or even things like balancing and polarity, that are these sort of classic, the international system. These were sort of ideas or concepts that are sort of familiar in some ways to a political scientist. Interconnections. But, can feel very radical in other spaces. I'm doing some work with colleagues at Saïd, where we're sort of saying how have different disciplines thought about systems theory. Because, we're talking about this in lots of different ways. But early systems change literature came out of cybernetics, came out of engineering. There's a very sort of engineering approach to it sometimes, which can be wonderful to understand things like feedback loops, for modeling those, but miss some of the idea of systems of power, norms, ideas, that would be very much, certain types of political scientists would be very attentive to. And ecologists, that's another area where you think about systems a lot. How ecosystems work, niches balancing. There is sort of looking at the cross pollination between different disciplines and how they think about systems and how they think about how systems change. I've always been interested in political science, which again, is very

interested in stasis and change. So, bringing sort of a systems change lens to it has been interesting. It is a bit of a roundabout question.

Elisa 28:04

It makes sense. It totally fascinated all of us in that class. I also remember that you conducted your own little research with us students, when you asked all of us to write. So some of us came up with a picture, to tell a story about ourselves about something that matters to us. And that method is a qualitative method called 'photo-elicitation and interviewing'. You often combine qualitative and quantitative work. What's the benefit of that? And in each category, do you have a preference? Do have a favorite method within one?

Justin 28:10

It always was so funny to me how you talk mainly about qualitative stuff. But, the few times we talked about quantitative stuff, you were the most hawkish! You would not let anyone get away with some bad data analysis. Clear to me that you care a lot about both? Either you do qualitative well, or you don't do it at all! I remember that forever.

Kate 29:04

Yeah! So photo-elicitation interviewing, I think, is a really cool method. I talked to you guys about it. I learned about it at a conference because I had been presenting my doctoral research where I did much more conventional survey questions. So I had a set of questions and skip patterns and would talk to people and then had some open items. But, primarily closed because I was talking to so many people. So interviewed over 200 former combatants. And then I went and presented at a conference where someone was doing photo-elicitation. And I thought, "wow, she's just really cool!" "She's getting all, you know, she's got the power dynamics worked out. She's got people involved. She's got people interpreting the data that they're producing. She's using cameras. This is just really neat!" And so you know, one good thing about academia is as long as you cite the person you can learn and borrow from them. She really encouraged me down this route, particularly when working with complicated or vulnerable populations. The more you can use tools like photo-elicitation, the better and the more sort of comfortable those relationships can be. So I've used that in subsequent projects, not with ex-combatants, but with low income sellers in Kenya. And then used it with you guys, which was fun. I think I'll probably do next year, we'll see. In terms of mixing and methods. For my master's research, was all interviews with all elite interviewees on this issue of DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration) programs, and reintegration in East Timor. The way I expanded it into a doctoral thesis was by adding the survey component. But I knew that with any kind of publication, or anything you're being examined on, methods are really where you can get nailed. Because there's sort of more right or wrong ways of doing it. Whereas with things like interpretation, that's much more subjective or disciplinary. So I was very conscious about, if I'm going to put in the effort of doing survey research, I really need to make sure that I'm creating my sample correctly. I'm doing this in a way that I can draw conclusions from it. I did try to learn more about how to do that for my doctorate. So that was one big area of learning, where I knew that this wasn't gonna be my strength, but I did want to do the sample design correctly. So took some statistics for that. More recently, I've been sort of the qual (qualitative) person on an RCT (randomised control trial) project, where I've got my co-authors are from the Center for the Study of African Economies at Oxford, and, doing field work with them, and really needing to

learn about RCTs, and how they work, and how the stats behind them work and how to communicate what you're doing to people who are concerned. That was really, sort of, a second time going to school. So Mohammed Mechi has a lot of credit for anything I know about stats. He's been extremely helpful for teaching me. I'm very resistant to this idea that quantitative work is the only way of knowing. But, I think you need to be doing, whatever method you're doing, you need to be doing it properly. So that's hopefully the message that came through on some of the methods teaching I do.

Elisa 32:41

Definitely! Justin, I can't wait any more, we need to talk about Timor-Leste. I did my little background research before talking to you today. And I stumbled upon a description of how you logged over 1000 kilometers on your motorcycle through Timor-Leste for doctoral field work. And I quote, 'from the coffee growing areas of Aileu, to the flat plains of Lautém, and tracking down former members of the resistance movement that fought Indonesian occupation for a quarter century'. I mean, can we just talk about that for you?

Justin 33:17

So first of all, you're a badass. And pretty sure most PhDs do not require you to ride a motorcycle at all.

Elisa 33:24

I think a specific question I have for that, and the sort of the barriers that you have encountered or you've been facing when you went there? So, in terms of access to data, or data quality, but also in terms of language and culture. And specifically, because I myself am a woman, I'm interested if you think that, in any way, that has affected your experience in different countries from the one you confirm?

Kate 33:58

All really good questions. I was able to do these survey interviews, and I use what's called a cluster sample. So, the big breakthrough for my thesis was I went to a UN office that was dealing with the registration for people, for veterans. So people would sign up to receive payments; they'd be vetted. And that was sort of the process that I was looking at quite closely was these committees that we're going around and saying "who was a real veteran and who wasn't?" Which, as you can imagine, is a really complicated thing to determine, particularly in a sort of a guerrilla warfare situation, right? You know, this idea of, "Oh, were you in the barracks and did you have a uniform", just doesn't make any sense because no one's that way. So it becomes highly gendered. Women didn't often carry guns. They're actually very few guns used in this conflict. So some of these categories, stop making sense. If you're a kid that's moving information, can you be counted as a veteran? And of course, because there's a resource tied to it, it becomes really contested. So really, really interesting moment about how is veteranhood and service being defined. And so that was what I was interested in. I went to this UN Office and this guy was helping the registration program. And I said, "Oh, could I have that list?", and on a thumb drive, he gave me the full data set. Which I think is in this GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) world, let alone...

Justin 35:34

I was gonna say, I think that's a red flag for GDPR!

Kate 35:37

He really shouldn't have given me a full list of a few 1000 of people's names. And so I ended up with this very large PDF, that had people's birth names, their birthplace, and their nom de guerre (French for 'war name'). So, they're their code name. So I used that to draw samples, that was my sample frame. And if I just said, "I'm going to randomly select 200 people out of this, this country, it's not so big, but it's hard to move around." So you'd be sort of like looking for Justin, there, then you'd be looking for Elisa there, it'd be much too hard. I selected samples, like clusters within and then found people within those clusters. I would go out on my motorbike and say; "have you seen two green eyes?", because people would be known by their code names. "Hi, I'm Kate, I'm looking for two green eyes". And they'd say, "Oh, he's over there, you'd have to go down there. He's with his sister, he's down there." So you just on this sort of wild goose chase looking for these people. I designed that methodology with this idea of, I want this to be as rock solid, and as an no criticism should be able to be leveled against this thesis. I want this to be really rock solid. And it also was at that moment where Sheryl Sandberg had done that speech where she said, "make decisions, like you weren't afraid." And so I said, "Okay, this is going to be the methodology. The best that I could come up with to studying this question." And the problem with that advice about acting like you're not afraid, or what would you do, if you weren't afraid, is that actually these things are kind of scary. It doesn't really take into account that sometimes we're sort of we are cautious for certain reasons. But I got myself into it. I had the real advantage of speaking Tetum (one of the two official languages of Timor-Leste) basically fluently from having been there for a few years. So my language skills were good.

Elisa 37:41

That's amazing!

Kate 37:43

I had some Indonesian, which also helped. But, in some cases, people spoke, like Fataluku, or something; a third language. And so I'd work with a translator for that. But mainly I was operating in Tetum. And so that helped the language stuff. Some of it was really, you know, problems of infrastructure. There was only one ATM operating when I was there. And so you were carrying cash. There's no real hotel infrastructure. So I would stay with nuns, which actually, there, my gender was very, very useful. I'd show up where there'd be a mission or a nunnery and say, "Do you have an extra room?", and they almost always have an extra room. And it would be really, really nice and safe and clean. So I've stayed with, even though I'm not a religious person, that was where I could find places to stay. You know, gender cuts both ways in fieldwork, where sometimes it can be a real source of access, because people are keen to be seen with a white lady. You get access and you're not threatening. You're sort of interesting to be around and sometimes you can feel more vulnerable, finding places to stay and stuff like that. But overall it was quite an experience.

Justin 39:08

That's incredible. Do you still ride a motorcycle?

Kate 39:13

No, I don't! I should say it was like sort of a semi automatic. It was, like, just one step above a moped. So don't picture some, like, big Harley Davidson out on the open road.

Justin 39:28

That's your next bike.

Kate 39:29

That's the next bike. I'm going to keep that idea! If I had a little black sort of scooter and a big helmet.

Justin 39:40

One last thing I wanted to ask about the Timor-Leste stuff is, would you say the language skills were a big part of why, you being a white American from Oxford, no less, showing up and, I'm guessing that would make some people want to be seen with you, but it would probably make other people not want to talk to you at all? Would you say the language is a big part of overcoming that? Or were there other things too?

Kate 40:07

Yeah, so I think language is really massive. When I got my fellowship, even though I had some good skills, I was a good writer, if you're coming straight out of undergrad, your skill set is limited in some ways. They often didn't quite know what to do with me. So I used a lot of that sort of downtime to work on the language, because I realized that, that would be where I could be most useful to the organization, because my boss, and those above me didn't really have good language skills. I'd taken intensive Indonesian classes before going before moving there. And that helped, because Tetum, it's sort of a mash of Portuguese and Indonesian. It has a grammar a lot like Indonesian where you don't do verb conjugation. You can actually learn it quite quickly. Which makes it so you can be conversational much faster in Tetum than in a lot of other languages.

Justin 41:15

Oh, that makes sense. And the conjugation thing is the same in Indonesian, right?

Kate 41:20

Exactly!

Justin 41:21

Lukman (Lukman Oesman, MPA Alumni at UCL's IIPP 2020/2021) was telling me not too long ago, my classmate, was saying, "Indonesian is the easiest language to learn! You gotta come here and learn it."

Kate 41:30

It's really interesting, because, part of Indonesia being created as a state, one of the challenges is this was this massive archipelago with lots of different languages. Modern Indonesian is partially designed to be language that can be learned easily. There's sort of a political history to why the language works the way it does. And so, you know, Indonesia, despite being young and highly diverse, all their official

documents are just in one language. Whereas a place like India doesn't have the same kind of linguistic nation building, that happened in Indonesia. So Benedict Anderson, (author of *Imagine Communities*), very famous book called *Imagine Communities*, looks at Indonesia and language as being a really core part of that.

Justin 42:20

Right. The class that was on every one of my syllabus is at Berkeley, (California, USA) when I took a couple development studies classes. If you don't mind, Kate, I think we want to talk, we have a few minutes left, about some of your more recent stuff. You've recently done a lot of work looking at gig workers. Specifically, you wrote a paper about gig workers at the base of the pyramid, and Kenya (Roll, 2020, *Gig work at the base of the pyramid: considering dependence and control*). I have a few questions about that. But could you just talk a little bit about that recent work you've been doing?

Kate 42:57

Yeah. So this has been a really nice piece of work, and a continuation of some of that stuff I was doing with Catherine. So the base the pyramid development is an idea that corporations, by selling to the poor, and then in later iterations by employing the poor, working with the poor, can create a form of development. So economic development, primarily, but also other other forms of development. There's a lot of win-win arguments that are made around this, that this is good for the poor, and it's good for the companies. I think what Catherine's work, and what some of my work has done is sort of question, "Okay, well, we see some benefits to both. But how are these distributed? How equally are these distributed? And what are the costs or risks associated?" We're very interested in route-to-market programs, where corporations work with low income sellers to do distribution, and this can be food products. This has been done all over the world with different kinds of things, whether bata shoes, or cosmetics, or confectionery. So this is a pretty sort of a way of working that's been reproduced in lots of places. I think where I got interested in some of the gig work questions, was there sort of critiques about whether or not this is good for the world, good for workers. And I wanted to explore the ways in which, or why it would be good, or why it would be be not good for workers. I look to some of the scholarship, particularly legal scholarship on gig work, to start thinking about that and create a framework for analyzing this. That scholarship, which is coming out of primarily; US, Canada, Europe, some of the cases in Italy, is saying that we care about employment relationships, because of issues of dependence and control. If I'm a worker in a factory town, and there's only one employer, they can exploit me, right? They can really call the shots because I don't really have that many other options. So we need employment protections. And we're very concerned about exploitation there. And then control is similar. So if I have to wear a uniform and follow certain rules and use someone else's tools, and show up each day and have a lot of managerial control over me, we also worry about exploitation. So we have to build in protections; like working week hours, limits on that, vacation time, sick leave. We're always worried about these issues of dependence and control. What I observed in some of these papers I've been working on is that when we look at these gig workers, or what I would call gig workers at the base of the pyramid, we need to be attentive to these concerns. Because we've almost always been talking about them as micro-entrepreneurs, as self-starters, as people who are doing this kind of entrepreneurial activity, which means we don't even think about them. That they've been put in this cognitive category of micro- entrepreneurs, primarily, that means we don't think about there being an employment relationship. We don't think about degrees of dependence and control that are going on in

this relationship. So I thought if we do this shift, we shift that labels, we drop that micro-entrepreneurial label, which allows for there to be a lot of, 'entrepreneurs take risks, so risk is normal, and that's fine', we say actually, "this person is an employee, or form of employee". We can approach that question a little bit differently. So, yeah, that's some of my recent work.

Justin 46:57

That's such a good segue into the other thing I wanted to ask about this. I don't know if you heard, but in last November, in California, which is where I'm from, they passed a law by popular vote, that explicitly made gig workers, independent contractors, rather than employees. I actually remember I got this piece of mail that had a smiling Latina woman next to her Prius that said, 'I love being my own boss'. Sponsored by Uber, right? I remember just thinking that was such, at best, a massive simplification. But also, it just seemed like a kind of manipulative tactic to me. But, I'm just curious, that makes me think that so much of what you're talking about applies in Western countries as well. Although these apps were kind of designed for countries with Western infrastructure and customs, and then superimposed on to places like Kenya. I'm just curious, how do you see what elements of this work do you think are similar in the West? And in developing countries? And then what are specific to Kenya, or perhaps other developing countries?

Kate 48:18

It's a really interesting question. There's an element there about to what extent is it good for workers to be seen as independent contractors versus to be seen as employees. That's where all these legal fights are what's the right classification? That's where you get interested in these dependents and control tests. That's where some of that thinking is coming up. And it is a complicated thing. When you talk to people who are doing this work, the idea of independence and setting their own hours is extremely important. That kind of autonomy is really important, particularly if you contrast it to the other work that's available. There might be actually more upward mobility possible in these situations, particularly in Kenya, than if they were in formal employment. We can't just sort of fetishize formal employment. It actually could be similarly problematic or exploitative. In terms of north/south developed, developing, the first 'Uber' ride I ever took was in Kenya and then have used 'Grab' and all that in the Philippines. There's a lot of digital infrastructure, digital work, is happening all over the world and like micro work is a big trend. And maybe Dr Greetja Corporaal (Research Fellow and British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at Saïd Business School), she might have spoken about that at SBS (Saïd Business School) where you're seeing digital labor in the global south. Loads, right or digitally mediated immediate labor. I wouldn't say it's sort of necessarily just a Northern phenomenon, or Northern moving to southern phenomenon because I think you see it happening in lots of different places. And the work, the paper that I was writing about gig work the BOP (Bottom of the Pyramid), it doesn't even have a digital component to it. There isn't sort of an app interface. But I think those characteristics of gig work where you don't have any employment protections, you're being managed remotely, but there's elements of surveillance, I think that's still all valid. And one of the sort of the tricks that you see with ride or digital companies is this idea that we're so new, you don't even know what to do with us. So there's sort of a moment of remembering, "Oh, these are just companies. And this is just labor." And so saying, "we need a whole new category of worker", or, "Uber is something completely different from a taxi". So you do this regulatory arbitrage, before they sort of catch up and say, "actually, this person is

still a worker, why are we saying that all these protections that we've developed over time don't apply?" And so there's sort of this crawling back and reclassification that you see quite a bit.

Justin 51:10

Would you say that perhaps that innovation is political?

Kate 51:13

Innovation is political. Absolutely! No, no question.

Elisa 51:18

Categories matter if you decide this, or this. Although, very often, that's skewed, right?

Justin 51:24

And that might actually matter less if they're classified as an employee, if there's universal health care in the country, or things like that. I do think these things are complicated. And like you said, it could be better for someone to do gig work than no work, or a much worse job. I think it's a really good reminder to look a little bit deeper than the surface of these new forms of labor being just a purely a good thing or an innovative thing. I think they definitely need to be scrutinized.

Elisa 52:03

Absolutely! I was going to very briefly, I know we don't have enough time, but touch upon another work you've been doing in Kenya, the RCTs (Random Control Trials), around microfinancing, and the fact that you started looking at, normally you go into there and you start studying ideas and phenomena, and how people connect, or power relations and so on. In this case, it was a little different, because you started designing something, an interest free asset financing method where, for example, people will get a bicycle, and then you would also share the risk as well as the reward. So, a very different approach to microfinancing that, then what we usually work with. Can you just a little bit elaborate on that work? And where you're heading so far? (see Meki et al, 2021, Mutuality and the Potential of Microequity)

Justin 52:50

And you're the qualitative person, right? You're the one that has to always make sure that they're being clear about what they're actually measuring, and things like that. Right?

Kate 52:59

It's been a really wonderful project. Some of the initial interviews that we did with people, so qualitative interviews, helped to understand what challenges they were facing in their work. And so then this can sort of inform where interventions are needed. So that came in, and really understanding again, the business models where, if someone wants to make more money in this arrangement, and leaving the employment relationship as it is, they just need to sell more volume, right? There's no other way to increase your income, except for an increasing volume. And that's really capped. These people were taking and collecting stock at a stock point, and then walking, and selling while walking. It's very easy to observe both, by talking to people, or in the data from the the company that, people who have bicycles or people who have cars, they increase by multiples, because they can just access that many

more places to sell to. And potentially also carry more goods, more diverse goods, which can really help help incomes. The intervention really is the brainchild of my colleague, Dr Muhammad Meki, (Dr Muhammad Meki, OCIS Lecturer in Islamic Finance at the University of Oxford), who I mentioned before, who really brought some interests from Islamic finance. And so a real interest in how do you do asset financing without being focused on debt. This is also sort of a response. There was sort of this move in the last 10, maybe even 20 years saying, microfinance, Grameen, this is gonna be the big unlock. Then there's the first wave of enthusiasm, particularly around social financing where you'd be in lending groups, or your guarantors would be other members of your social circle. Anthropologists sort of went in later and said, "Wow, this is this is creating a lot of stress". If people can't pay, this is creating lots of difficulties. Sort of concern about what are the consequences of using debt based microfinancing. What Muhammed is looking at doing is saying, how do we make this more like equity, where you have someone who is investing in your very small business. As you improve, as you do better, you both gain. And if you do poorly, you both carry some losses. Whereas in debt based microfinance particularly for something that would benefit the company you're working for, they get upside, but there's no downside besides, maybe having to replace you if you drop out. So, we developed a few different contract types, and then had been following to help people buy bicycles. And then following how they perform in these different contracts. And we're just finishing up that paper now. And it's been really eye opening to work on an RCT. Really learned a huge amount about how they work and about how people respond and in microfinance more generally. But, we've had good results. It seems like this kind of equity-based model is effective and potentially really useful, and avoids big debt traps.

Elisa 56:19

Super interesting. Like the ending point, as an idea that sort of, look out. So when you get invited, and you do get invited a lot, like big events, where you're supposed to talk about your research and what you've been working on and make recommendations, I'm wondering how do you make your voice heard? How do you make people listen to you and influence their day to day activities with the kind of work that you were doing?

Kate 56:45

It's a good question. I was on an ODI panel on tech regulation yesterday. You sort of have to prep for these kinds of things, or talk to students who are going to be on a panel. And I think usually, the advice that I give is to think about what perspective you're bringing, who you are on that panel. So if you're a student on a panel, be a student! Don't try to fill the role of a senior professor. Think about what is your particular perspective and viewpoint and how it can be really valuable, in particular, if you are the only one in the room. I often think about what's sort of the thing that makes me different on a panel, or makes me different in different perspective. And sometimes that is, for the ODI thing, I was the only academic, so you sort of bring in some of that. Or you might be the only woman, or the only young person. There's lots of different things to think about, how you can bring that to the fore. But, I sort of fall backs. I always ask the same questions of, to what end? For whom? Who's defining? We've talked about categories of labor categories of veteran, these kind of classic power relations questions that we talked a lot about in in the course. Those are always useful to bring to any discussion. And also thinking about, you know, what are the assumptions that that lie behind different recommendations? Or what are the assumptions that lie behind different approaches, and even just saying what you're

seeing. So the the panel yesterday had a lot of talk about media literacy, and how that would be a good response to some of the problems we're seeing in social media. Which is fine, you know, no problem. Media literacy is a good thing. But what does it mean to be shifting responsibility to individuals? Right, it's like saying, we should do anti-fraud training for old people, rather than thinking about how do you reduce fraudulent practices by corporations. Doing that kind of stepping back. And observing can be can be really nice. I often try to bring thoughts about power. Thoughts about to what end? Maybe to tie it back to IIPP. I think innovation is political. It's just one of those wonderful touch points that any of these kinds of conversations, where are the politics? Where's the power? Because it's almost always there, and worth identifying.

Justin 59:30

Kate, thank you so much for being a great teacher to us and for your great advice you've given me on many things, including this podcast. And it's been a pleasure having you!

Kate 59:42

This was a total joy. I haven't talked about some of this stuff in a really long time. So it's kind of fun to go down memory lane. Thank you Elisa. Thank you, Justin. And this was this was really fun!