
AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR NATHAN FIALA BY JULIA WARD

Hi, this is Julia Ward, I'm a staff writer for the ARE department newsletter, is this Professor Fiala?

Yes, hello!

I thought we could start with some introductions, so our names and what each of us does at the university. My name is Julia Ward, I am a sophomore majoring in Applied and Resource Economics and I write for the ARE newsletter.

I'm a professor in the department. I mostly do work in development, mostly in Africa and Asia and now in the U.S., and I'm also doing some work in New York State and with The Zwick Center here in New England.



Professor Nathan Fiala

Awesome, so to start off why don't you tell me a little more about yourself?

I conduct randomized experiments in developing countries. I've worked in around a dozen countries including Myanmar, Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa, Ghana and Paraguay, lots of places. My interest is understanding the impact of programming that governments and organizations are doing with poor people in these countries.

I do randomized trials similar to what medical professionals do with drugs. A lot of the work I do is very large scale but I only use my own data, so I usually manage teams of 30 to 100 people who go out and collect data from communities to measure their condition before a program is launched, what their condition is after and differences between groups. I have over 20 projects going on around the world. Most of the work I've done so far focuses around cash transfers, which is going to be a big deal especially with coronavirus relief, so I study how people receive cash, how they invest it, and we find that they usually spend it well (like on household needs, not on alcohol or drugs). I also work with microfinance, working with people who don't have a lot of access to financial services. I'm also working with the Green Climate Fund, which was a part of the Paris Accord, so I work with a huge portfolio of programs around the world working with climate change, helping people adjust to changes in the environment.



How did you become interested in Economics?

I took a very different route than most academics. I actually started in Community College, I'm a first generation college graduate (my family does not have any college experience). I actually grew up in Saudi Arabia, my father worked for an airline so I

did a lot of travelling as a child. I figured out pretty early on what I wanted to do, and I wanted to work in development helping people out all around the world. I got some really good advice in community college. I was told that I needed to build a very specific skill that could be marketable. So, we discussed what I was interested in and landed in economics. At Arizona State University, I actually took 7 years to finish my undergrad because I had a very broad interest and a lot of minors, and I was working 3 jobs because I paid for college all myself. I was talking to my advisor and we were talking about what I might want to do, working for the World Bank and stuff, and he said all those people have PhD's! So, I went and pursued that at UC Irvine. I did a post doc in Berlin, Germany. I'm really interested in research and its real world relevance, which isn't something you find very often in academia so I do a hybrid. I spend a lot of my time doing what you would call extension work, working with policy makers relaying info about best practices and what they should be thinking about when implementing policies.

What made you decide to become a Professor and what brought you here to UCONN?

Academia gives me a lot of flexibility on what I want to do which is really great. Academics don't get to choose where they end up. I got an offer and I was living in Germany at the time, and it was the best offer I had at the time. That's the reality of academia - you go where you have a job. People who get choosy about where they want to be usually don't get a job; it's not a nice way of putting it but it's just how it is. I really actually like my department, we're a really applied department and we do a lot of work with policy and government. A lot of economic departments don't work on that type of thing, so this is really exciting.

What classes are you currently teaching and what do you enjoy or dislike about them?

I teach two different types of courses, one is a topics

course (I have a PhD and an undergraduate course and its basically development economics). I have another course that I teach about how to conduct randomized control trials, impact evaluations, what to do with that data and how to analyze it. The first class is all about the topics and the second is about how we do all these things. It's a passion of mine and it's a way for me to hand out that passion to other people. It's also a way to measure the impact of what we do, it's a way for students to think about what we do and quantifiably measure it.

I saw in your biography that your current interests are Development, Food Insecurity, the Environment and Political Economy. Can you talk a little bit about each of those topics and why you find them interesting?

My interest is working with the poorest most vulnerable people I can work with; in Uganda, that's generally rural populations, subsistence farmers, so food insecurity is super important there. Here in CT, I work a lot with the homeless, I'm working in New York state on eviction and financial security. A lot of the environmental stuff is figuring out how we can help people adapt to a changing environment, farmers in Uganda are finding their agricultural seasons are changing a lot and that can affect food security, how they can eat. And with the political side, I do a lot of work with voting, how people can be involved in their government and with what their government is giving them.



What do you hope to accomplish while you are here at UCONN?

I obviously have quite a bit of work that I'm doing on a lot of topics. Another area I'm interested in is research transparency and post-publication reviews. We need to dig deeper and think about studies that are out there. I do a lot of work reviewing research projects and making sure they're answering the questions they are meant to be answering. That's definitely a future goal, I also want to continue my work with governments in Africa and the populations there.

Of all of your research, which project are you most proud of and which was your favorite to work on?

Probably my first one where I went to Uganda in 2007 for 6 months while a PhD student. When I went, my advisors weren't very excited about me going, but it turned out to be a very influential study and it published very well. I did follow up research for that. We measured the impact 2 years and 4 years after and now I'm figuring out a 12 year follow up., I think it's very exciting to have that level of engagement.



What is your favorite country to work in?

Uganda. I've worked in a lot of countries; Uganda has a lot of wonderful weather and people and it has a lot of problems. They have a civil war that is ended a few years ago, so I went to study that. They also have a lot of problems with their environment, political relations and poverty. But yeah, they have beautiful weather, so a lot of it is that.

More photos from recent visits:



About Professor Fiala

Dr. Nathan Fiala is an Associate Professor in the Agricultural & Resource Economics Department (ARE) in the College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources (CAHNR) at the University of Connecticut. He received his PhD in Economics in 2009 from the University of California, Irvine, and joined the ARE Department in 2014.