

The Business of Policymaking Podcast

Episode 3 – In conversation with Willem Adema

Speakers: Jana Javornik and Willem Adema

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[00:00:24] **Jana:** Hi, and welcome to the Business of Policymaking - Leeds University Business School podcast, exploring everything you've ever wanted to know about the intersecting world of policymaking and academia.

I'm Jana Javornik and in this episode, I speak to Dr Willem Adema, a Senior Economist in the OECD Social Policy Division, about insights into international policymaking.

Willem has worked for the OECD, which is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development for nearly three decades, having led multiple teams of analysts of family, children, gender, and housing policies, and maintaining multiple OECD databases. Willem is the perfect person to tell us more about the life of the OECD from the inside.

I really enjoyed listening to Willem as he has some amazing insights into the policy landscape, the role of in house versus academic research in policy process, the language, the players, the time constraints under which high-level decision makers operate.

We get a unique insight into his typical working day at the OECD, so I hope you enjoyed this episode as much as we did.

[00:01:38] **Jana:** I am happy to have you with us today, Willem. It is such a privilege to host you on our show. Thank you for joining us today.

[00:01:48] **Willem:** Well, thank you very much for having me.

[00:01:52] **Jana:** Willem, during your tenure at the OECD, you have led various in-house teams of analysts. You worked in mixed teams. You regularly collaborated with academics and governments, you actively created opportunities for and invited academic research. You also encourage debates and knowledge exchanges, and I wonder, with your rich experience, including a seat at multiple tables at various levels of decision making, has probably offered an invaluable insight into the processes of policymaking and the role evidence plays in this.

Please, might you provide a bit of an insight into your work? How does it look like? What does that entail? What does it entail to be a senior economist / policy analyst at the OECD?

[00:02:40] **Willem:** Well, yeah, my role has changed over the years, obviously, but what I currently do is I lead a team of analysts and statisticians within the OECD Directorate of Labour and Social Affairs and the OECD Social Policy divisions.

And my team works on issues related to families, gender, and housing. Evidence-based policy development is part and parcel of our work. We maintain various databases because we know that if we have data and if we have evidence, we have a much better way of convincing governments to consider certain policy reform.

In the team we maintain the family database, the affordable housing database, the gender portal with colleagues around the OECD, and the social expenditure database. Using that evidence, those data, we draft - and various national evidence - and that's one way where academics come in - is being used for preparing policy analysis reports, and using recommendations and debates with policymakers on what good policy reform might look like in a given situation.

So, yeah, I mean, my days vary, but depending on the projects that are going on I steer my teams or do analytical work myself. Although that has become less and less because over the years, I've grown in maturity, one would hope, and seniority. So, you have more colleagues to steer and to talk with, which is actually a lot of fun.

Working for the OECD, if I can make an advertisement pitch, one of the fun bits is that you see so many different people, so many different backgrounds, it really is an interesting work environment.

[00:05:04] **Jana:** Willem, the OECD is really based on what we call in-house analysis. What role would you say the OECD in-house analyses have in policy process? And you did mention, but I do wonder when and why would you reach out to academia, if at all?

[00:05:22] **Willem:** Oh, we do reach out to academia. Let me take the second part of the question first.

We do reach out to academia quite regularly and it depends a bit on the project. So, at the moment, one of the projects I'm involved in is a big project with the European Union on homelessness. And within that context we have consulted with a range of academics who have worked on the issue in terms of trying to shape questionnaires, make sure that we ask the right questions, help us think about the methodology. Because homelessness, apart from the issues and the effects for the individuals at hand, they're terrible and their plight is for everyone to see on the streets of Paris, but elsewhere too.

But for us as policy analysts, it's of course incredibly interesting because it is such a difficult issue to measure, which makes it a challenge. And we like at the OECD to measure things, and this one is particularly tricky to measure, and it's also not straightforward what the right policy might be because it depends very much on how the person, or the group of persons, have ended up in that situation.

So, from that perspective, it is a very challenging subject and academics who have worked on this in the past have been very helpful in contributing to our thinking about what should the questionnaire be, what should the questionnaire look like, and what should our methodology look like.

In that sense, they're a sounding board. Another way academics influence our work is when we do a country review, if we do like, in late June, we released the Review of Norway of family work and fertility trends.

In the course of that work, we interview officials, we interview stakeholders, NGOs but we also interview academics to find out what their research shows or what their opinions are on certain topics. And if we do a country review that is standard. We did this for a gender review on Hungary, on Estonia... I mean, this is part and parcel of the game almost.

And, of course, on a regular basis, I try to keep up with the literature, so I try to keep reading recent papers that come out on a particular topic.

So, there's various ways in which academics influence our work either more directly and direct approaches or being interviewed or exchanges in panel discussions. But also, in the beginning of processes, particularly when it concerns country studies.

[00:08:51] **Jana:** You've mentioned that you read widely, and I know you do, and you try to keep abreast with the developments also in scholarship. Obviously because you cover such a wide range of themes you need to read widely, but I do wonder how do you identify potential consultants from academia?

How does that work? Kind of like the gritty nitty detail. I'm very much interested in how does one who does excellent academic work really comes to the attention of an OECD senior analyst?

[00:09:25] **Willem:** Oh, there's different ways. You'll hear about it from colleagues. So that's one thing.

You will find that press reports on a particular paper or on a particular finding, and then you think "Oh, right. I would like to read the original piece." This happens very often on the internet, and it's not always that straightforward to find the original piece because newspapers do not always cite that, which is a big issue.

But yeah. So, you read about it, you hear about it, and then you read the piece and you think, oh, this is interesting. And let's invite him or her in for a webinar on the topic. If you do a particular country review, you talk to the officials, and they will give you probably a list of potential academics for you to consult with.

There are also academics who sent me their work, who say "Right. Here's my latest paper. What do you think?"

I am also a member of the editorial board of the International Social Security Review. In that context I would also see what kind of papers are produced. So yeah, there's different sources that come to me.

[00:10:55] **Jana:** Willem - you work with your group in an incredibly fast paced environment. How would you describe your experience vis-a-vis academic approach to policy analysis, evaluation? What are your observations in terms of comparing the two worlds?

[00:11:15] **Willem:** There's a certain amount of overlap between the two worlds, but we often do not have the time to deep dive into the national micro data, which allow us to run a three-year academic project, for example. So that would be one of the differences. I mean we have projects, but they normally are of a shorter time horizon than this.

It might be helpful for your listeners to realize that the OECD is an organization which has committees. So, my work serves the Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee, and these committees consist of the delegates of the 38 OECD countries, and they sort of determine our work programme.

We make proposals, but if there is a large group of delegates who say, "right, we want you for the next year to do this work on artificial intelligence, or on pensions or on long-term care", that is what drives in many ways the agenda of our work. And the reports we publish are also checked by the delegates. There is a certain amount of fact-checking involved.

I work for the Labour and Social Affairs, but there are other committees, the Education Policy Committee, the Environmental Policy Committee, the Economic Policy Committee. There's a whole range of committees across the OECD served by the Secretariat who produce papers, documents, analyses, data on a wide range of issues.

[00:13:11] **Jana:** This is a unique insight into the daily life of the OECD. Let's say, we as academics would like to contribute to the shaping of political policy agendas. But it's sometimes, I think, challenging to identify what's really trending in terms of where's the demand for work, for advice.

You've mentioned there are certain policy issues that you were asked to cover and, obviously, Governments know how to ask the OECD, but how do academics find out what's really trending, what's buzzing, where the demand lies in terms of policy development?

[00:13:51] **Willem:** Well, I mean, one of the identifiers is of course what do they think in your own country? What is your government, what are your civil servants working on, what are they most interested in?

And that gives you a feeling for what might be policy relevant. Now, the topics will differ across countries, and you must be aware of that.

For instance, in Korea and Japan the birth rates are incredibly low. In Korea it is 0.8 children per woman. That feature of the demographic trends is the main driver of policy development, of policy thinking in Korea, much more so than it would be in my country, the Netherlands, or the UK, or many other OECD countries. So, the issue in Korea might be very different from what drives policy development in the UK at the moment.

Concerns about the costs of childcare, housing are big issues in the UK, and are also coming to the fore in many other OECD countries, but not all. The cost of childcare is not a pertinent issue in, let's say, Sweden. I mean, it differs very much. The first thing to identify is what are the policymakers in my country interested in? And does that link to international research?

Because what countries often do these days is come to us and say, "right, what's happening in this area in another country? What would be good practice to consider for policy development that we could use in our own country?" That gives you a feel for what may play internationally.

Now, in the social policy area - I mean, everyone can see there are imminent problems with demographic trends and the need for long-term care. We've started to think about that and think about how countries could best play into the needs that may emerge in this area. That is quite a universal area of concern.

But, as said, childcare is an issue in some countries, but not in others. So, yeah, it varies, but identify the topics and work accordingly.

I mean, when I was young, when I went to go and do my PhD, I did that on issues relating to the receipt of invalidity benefits and disability benefits which was incredibly high in the late eighties and in the early nineties.

And there was a lot of policy work going on in that area at that time, much less so nowadays. So yeah, it also changes with time.

[00:17:00] **Jana:** You understand well the politics of policymaking, different communities, different approaches, different types of policies, different types of decisions, also different coalitions, power plays, you've seen it all.

Can you offer any top tips or advice to academics who are willing and eager to engage with policy on how to reach and influence audiences beyond academia? How and where to start, how to gain access to the OECD, to the policy world? You did mention that a bit, but where to start?

[00:17:33] **Willem:** I think a good starting point is at home, because of the experience of those countries... then be willing to share those practices or that research from home with other countries. So that promotes the work in that way. There's no one single way in which you can get involved in national politics.

But I would say that academics who are working on topical issues should be sharing their main findings, either with the press, with social media, and sooner or later it will be picked up. And then we will also get to hear about it.

We try to underpin our work with data and evidence, and in my experience, if anyone – academic, other stakeholder - has got a good story, has got good evidence underneath it, we're happy to listen and engage. It's as simple as that.

[00:18:48] **Jana:** The OECD obviously is seen as an important partner in shaping policy agendas. It has such an important role to play across the world. What would be your take on that?

[00:19:01] **Willem:** I think you should be aware of important context in which you tell your story, and you should be aware of things which may not necessarily show up in the data, which are otherwise very important.

For instance, in New Zealand there is a fairly large ethnic group who are either Māori or Pacific Islanders, and taken together, we're talking about 25% of the population.

But the Māori group is also fairly large, and they have a different culture in the sense that it's a matriarchy. It's the older women play a very large and determining role in that society. And what is the case is that a lot of the sole parents in New Zealand are often part of the Māori culture. And you need to be aware of the role women in that culture, which gives a different national context to whatever policy advice you may give on this issue and makes it more sensitive. You have to be aware of those cultural differences to make any sort of sensible observations on policy in those countries.

[00:20:34] **Jana:** Such an important point about the cultural intelligence as well. Thanks for that. But Willem, how does a typical day of a senior economist look like?

How many countries have you visited? How many groups have you spoken to in your career? How do you get along with the dynamics and a fast-paced way of working?

[00:20:58] **Willem:** I mean I have visited most, but not all, OECD countries over my tenure with the OECD, which is almost 30 years.

But yeah, as I said, I have a team working on family and gender and housing issues. So, my typical day: I would go into the office very early. I live, the OECD is based in Paris. I arrive at the office around 7.00, 7.15am.

The benefit of that is that it's very quiet in the office at that time. I have some time to myself to read, to do emails, before my colleagues come in, who generally come in at around 9, 9.30am. Then I generally have meetings with my team members on particular issues in their work. Or I have meetings with visitors. But these days I am much more likely to have meetings over Teams or Zoom, with delegates or with academics from different

countries, to discuss particular items, or journalists. That is part and parcel of the work as well.

So, during this week, I've spoken to people in Korea where we have an OECD Korea policy centre, about a family policy meeting that we are organizing later this year.

We've had discussions about gender work because the OECD has just adopted a new gender strategy at its last meeting of the OECD Council, which is basically the OECD governing body. And then once a year it meets at the ministerial level. And then they take various decisions.

We must implement that, so we had meetings about how to start to implement the OECD Gender Strategy and mainstream gender issues across a wider range of our work. We have had various internal housing issues to be discussed because as I said we're working on this big homelessness project, and we want to take that further.

We're thinking about developing a policy toolkit and we were having internal discussions on how that may shape up.

So yeah, that's what we do. And yesterday, I went to go and see, with a colleague, delegates to the Economic Committee because they wanted to know more about our gender work and how they can bring in more gender issues in their work.

I spoke to them, and of course they serve ministries of finance. Then you focus on issues like potential contributions to economic growth of including more women in the workforce, with more working hours. And you talk about hard-nosed issues like the gender pay gap and recent policy reform around pay transparency, but also childcare and parental leave and how to get more men to take parental leave, and thus to facilitate more intense participation of their partners in the workforce. We talk economics, and you focus on that.

So yeah, and it was actually a very interesting meeting in the sense that there was great interest in the topic, which makes me fairly positive about the future change in this area.

[00:24:52] **Jana:** That's so good because it's trending and it's buzzing in the UK, and it's been ever since 2015. And there are new findings coming up and we are still surprised over some of the findings. Whereas in countries such as Sweden or the Nordics in general these are considered as standard, but let's not go into that.

I really appreciate you taking the time out of your incredibly busy schedule. It's incredibly dynamic. I appreciate you being with us, but is there anything I didn't ask, and you would like to share, or any last words Willem Adema has at this point?

[00:25:27] **Willem:** I mean, what can I say? I mean, the OECD has been a very good employer to me. It has been giving me the opportunity to meet lots of interesting people

and lots of interesting countries and work on lots of different interesting issues over the years.

People should consider it as an employer, but people should also definitely consider it as a point of contact. If there are academics or anyone else who has a good story, in my case in the social policy area, but this applies to education, to the environment... If you have good evidence, and this can contribute to policy reform, we are willing to engage and to take that forward and consider the evidence and analyse it and work with it.

In that sense people should consider engaging with the OECD. And yeah, we can be found. We are approachable, so, please do so. Don't be shy and try to get in touch with us.

[00:26:43] **Jana:** Fantastic. I am sure a lot of our listeners have useful information and data to share with the OECD.

Willem, thanks a million for joining me today and taking an hour out of your incredibly busy schedule. By the way, it was really good seeing you after such a long while. Thanks again.

[00:27:02] **Willem:** No worries. It was my pleasure, and I was pleased to do it. And good luck with your series.

[00:27:13] **Jana:** You've been listening to the Business of Policymaking podcast from Leeds University Business School, presented by Jana Javornik and produced by Hannah Preston. If you'd like to get in touch about anything you've heard in this episode, our contact details are in the episode show notes.