Jack Willis

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Personal Information
Born: 12 March 1984
Citizenship: British, French

Last updated: 02/04/2025

Employment

Columbia University, Jan 2018 -
Assistant Professor, Department of Economics

Sciences Po, Sep 2023 - Dec 2023
Visiting Professor, Alliance Exchange Program, Department of Economics

Paris School of Economics, Jul - Dec 2017, Jan 2024 – June 2024
Visiting Researcher, Department of Economics

Education

Harvard University, 2011 – 2017
Ph.D. in Economics
Thesis: "Essays in Development Economics"

Paris School of Economics, Université Paris 1, 2007 - 2009
Masters in Economics (ETE-QEM)

Cambridge University, Trinity College, 2002 - 2006
Masters (Part III) and B.A. in Mathematics

Affiliations
2022 -   BREAD, J-PAL
2019 -   CDEP, CEPR, NBER

Publications

"Land Rental Markets: Experimental Evidence from Kenya" (with Michelle Acampora, Lorenzo Casaburi), *American Economic Review*, forthcoming

"Retractions: Updating from Complex Information" (with Duarte Gonçalves, Jonathan Libgober), *Review of Economic Studies*, conditionally accepted

"Converging to Convergence" (with Michael Kremer, Yang You), *NBER Macro Annual*, 2021

"Time vs. State in Insurance: Experimental Evidence from Contract Farming in Kenya" (with Lorenzo Casaburi), *American Economic Review*, 2018

Reviews / non-peer reviewed:

"Value Chain Microfinance" (with Lorenzo Casaburi), *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 2024

"Guns, Latrines, and Land Reform: Dynamic Pigouvian Taxation" (with Michael Kremer), *American Economic Review Papers & Proceedings*, 2016

Selected Research in Progress (with short descriptions)

"Health Insurance Subsidies and Asymmetric Information: Experimental Evidence from Uganda"

(with Lorenzo Casaburi, Kim Cramer), *endline March '25*

Distortions in health insurance markets, and the effect of contract terms on them, may be very different in low-liquidity settings. In a field experiment with 3,300 households in Uganda, we identify selection into health insurance, its behavioral effects on healthcare, and its impact on health status and financial outcomes. We also test how they depend on copays and premiums. Specifically, we measure households' WTP for health insurance with three different copay levels - $0, $1, and $2 - and then randomly assign households to one of the three, or control. Combining demand with outcomes – measured with survey data and detailed administrative data - enables a rich study of asymmetric information and the trade-offs between premiums and copays.

"Targeting Dynamic Poverty" (with Eric Teschke), *draft available*

Social programs aiming to target the poor often update recipient lists infrequently. We consider the implications - for targeting performance and for how to improve it - in the context of Proxy Means Tests (PMTs). The extent to which observed poverty reflects chronic versus transient poverty, versus simply measurement error, is central, as is the ability of targeting methods to differentiate them. Across seven settings, we show that PMT's performance deteriorates relatively slowly and they perform as well as "perfect" targeting after only one year. Targeting *future* poverty does no better while updating PMTs - the covariates, the predictive function, or both - improves performance over time, but only when done comprehensively. We investigate mechanisms using high-frequency consumption data.

"Frictions in Information Diffusion Among Smallholder Farmers" (with Nikhil Basavappa and Raissa Fabregas), *wave one completed*

Smallholder farmers vary substantially in their agricultural know-how, even within the same village. Do farmers value the information of others and, if so, what prevents its diffusion? We measure knowledge of, and WTP for, such information, and test interventions to encourage its diffusion and identify the corresponding frictions.

"The Impact of Contract Farming" (with Lorenzo Casaburi), *data collection completed*

Contract farming is a widespread organizational form for connecting farmers to value chains, both for outputs and inputs, yet we know relatively little about its effects on farmer outcomes. In a field experiment in Uganda and Rwanda, we randomize the expansion of a contract farming company (and whether it only offers farmers a purchase guarantee or also offers inputs on credit) and measure the effects on farming and broader welfare outcomes.

"Private vs. Public Infrastructure" (with Ben Krause and Michael Kremer)

Infrastructure services can often be supplied publicly - with high fixed cost and low marginal cost - or privately - with low fixed cost and high marginal cost. For example, electricity may be provided via the grid or generators, water via clean piped systems or private storage tanks and filters. We study the implications of these substitutes for infrastructure provision in growing and unequal economies, focusing on private infrastructure traps: equilibria where public provision would be efficient, but the rich access infrastructure services, privately, diminishing the likelihood of public provision. We apply the theory to the case of clean water provision in Odisha, India.

"Time versus State in Commitment" (with Lorenzo Casaburi and Sili Zhang), *midline in progress*

Insurance demand is typically highest just after disasters, when it is top of mind. Are people aware of this state dependence, and can it result in a demand for commitment? In a field experiment in Uganda, we offer farmers the option to commit to multiple years of pay-at-harvest insurance, demonstrating (to our knowledge) the first instance of a demand for commitment which cannot be explained by time preferences. A treatment making state dependence salient increases the demand for commitment.

"Decentralized Escrow" (with Duarte Gonçalves and Jonathan de Quidt), *piloting completed*

In trades with imperfect contract enforcement, the seller wishes to be paid upfront, while the buyer wishes to be paid on delivery, with trades often forgone. We study whether decentralized escrow – in which the buyer pays into a locked account, with each agent able to release the money to the other agent – can ease such frictions. Piloting of a lab-in-the-field experiment demonstrated promise, enlarging the set of feasible trades

among tailors, mechanics, and furniture makers. We have applied for funding for a field experiment.

"ICT for Environmental Adaptation: Mitigating Arsenic Exposure in Bangladesh" (with Lex Van Geen, Prabhat Barnwal, Michael Best)

How can ICT be harnessed to encourage environmental adaptation? Bangladesh recently blanket-tested wells for Arsenic contamination, providing well owners with their test results. Using the universe of test results, we study how the whole can be more useful than the sum of its parts, providing curated data summaries to individuals and policymakers to facilitate environmental adaptation.

"CSR and Selection in Digital Finance" (with Harrison Hong)

Do financial institutions do Corporate Social Responsibility to attract higher-quality borrowers? Working in the Philippines with a digital credit company – a product plagued by high default rates - we will measure the effect on repayment rates of tying loans to charity donations and compare it to that of lowering interest rates.

"Crop Insurance at Scale" (with Lorenzo Casaburi and Ricardo Pomer Munoz)

Crop insurance and crop switching can both help farmers adapt to climate change, if farmers participate. In a field experiment with the Zambian government, who has achieved unprecedented crop insurance coverage by bundling it with an input subsidy program, we cross-randomize insurance with an incentive to switch to more productive and resilient crops, studying whether the two are complements or substitutes.

Teaching
Instructor:
2024 -	Senior Seminar in Applied Micro Development (undergraduate), ECON 4911, Columbia
2020 -	Topics in Micro Development (Ph.D.), ECON 6290, Columbia
2018 -	Development Economics (undergraduate), ECON 4321, Columbia
2023	The Economics of Poverty (masters), IFCO 2730, Sciences Po

Teaching Fellow:
2015	Development Economics (Ph.D.), Ec 2390, Harvard University
2014, 13	Development Policy Strategy (masters), PED-309, Harvard Kennedy School
2014	Intermediate Microeconomics (undergraduate), Ec 1010a, Harvard University
2014	Development Macroeconomics (Ph.D.), Ec 2390c, Harvard University
2013	International Trade (Ph.D.), Ec 2530a, Harvard University
2009	Advanced Analysis (masters), Université Paris 1
2008	Multivariate Calculus (masters), Université Paris 1

Professional Activities
Presentations
2025	CSAE conference (scheduled), Imperial College London, London School of Economics, Paris School of Economics, University College London, University of Delaware
2024	CREST, King's College London, Rutgers University, Sciences Po
2023	Cambridge University, Paris School of Economics, Sciences Po, Toulouse School of Economics
2022	BREAD development (co-author), CEPR / Misum / SITE development, CEPR WEFIDEV annual workshop, NOVAFRICA conference, University of Chicago, U.C. Berkeley joint development-macro
2021	Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, IMF research seminar, NBER / BREAD development, NBER macro annual meeting, New York University, Trinity College Dublin, Yale University, U.C. Berkeley, UK FCDO research seminar
2020	Columbia University, NEUDC, University of Southern California
2019	New York University, NYC-area junior development
2018	EIEF Rome Junior Applied Microeconomics Conference, CEAR/MRIC workshop, NYC-area junior development, University of Wisconsin-Madison Emerging Scholars conference

2017   ABCA World Bank conference, Cambridge University, Columbia University, Cornell University, CREST, DIAL conference, Early Career Behavioral Economics conference, Institute for International Economic Studies, INSEAD, Lindau meetings, NBER / BREAD development, NBER insurance, Paris School of Economics, Princeton University, Sciences Po, Toulouse School of Economics, University College London, U.C. San Diego

2016   NEUDC, BREAD / LEAP pre-conference, NOVAFRICA conference

2015   CSAE conference, SAET conference

2013   SAET conference

Referee (papers and grants):

American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, American Economic Journal: Microeconomics, American Economic Review, American Economic Review: Insights, American Journal of Agricultural Economics, Econometrica, Economic Development and Cultural Change, Economic Journal, Economics of Transition, Food Policy, Journal of Development Economics, Journal of the European Economic Association, Journal of Public Economics, Journal of Political Economy, Journal of Risk and Insurance, NSF, Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics, PEDL, PNAS, Quarterly Journal of Economics, Review of Economics and Statistics, Review of Economic Studies, 3ie

Research Grants

2024   IGC, "Improving state effectiveness in arsenic risk mitigation: experimental evidence from Bangladesh" (with Prabhat Barnwal, Michael Best, Seung Min Kim, Lex Van Geen)

2024   Weiss, "Health Insurance Subsidies and Asymmetric Information: Experimental Evidence from Uganda" (with Lorenzo Casaburi, Kim Cramer)

2024   Lenfest, Columbia, "Decentralized Escrow" (with Duarte Gonçalves)

2024   STEG, "Private vs. Public Infrastructure" (with Michael Kremer)

2023   Weiss Fund, "Decentralized Escrow" (with Duarte Gonçalves)

2023   NBER Social Learning, "Understanding Information Diffusion in Poor and Rural Environments" (with Raissa Fabregas)

2023   USAID DIV, "Crop Insurance at Scale" (with Lorenzo Casaburi)

2020   USAID DIV, "Nolkup: an app to access low arsenic water in Bangladesh" (with Lex Van Geen, Prabhat Barnwal, Michael Best)

2020   ISERP, Columbia, "Incentivizing Un(der)banked Households to Socially Distance Through Conditional Digital Loan Forgiveness." (with Harrison Hong, Neng Wang)

2020   NBER Social Learning, "Understanding Information Diffusion in Poor and Rural Environments" (with Raissa Fabregas)

2019   IC2, UT Austin, "Understanding Information Diffusion in Poor and Rural Environments" (with Raissa Fabregas)

2019   SwissRe, "Health Insurance, Impact and Price Effects: Experimental Evidence from Kenya" (with Lorenzo Casaburi)

2018   PEDL, "The Impact of Contract Farming: Experimental Evidence from Kenya" (with Lorenzo Casaburi)

2018   ATAI, "The Impact of Contract Farming: Experimental Evidence from Kenya" (with Lorenzo Casaburi)

2016   ATAI, "Time vs. State in Insurance: Experimental Evidence from India" (with Lorenzo Casaburi, Bheeshm Chaudhary, Siddharth George)

2015   Weiss Fund, "Time vs. State in Insurance: Experimental Evidence from India" (with Lorenzo Casaburi, Bheeshm Chaudhary, Siddharth George)

2014   World Bank Big Data Innovation Challenge, "Targeting Poverty by Predicting Poverty: Using Machine Learning in Targeted Transfer Programs" (with Melissa Adelman, Sendhil Mullainathan, Paul Niehaus)

2012   Weiss Fund, "The Causes and Effects of Improved Health Supply: Evidence from Rwanda" (with Martin Rotemberg)

Supervising

Graduate students (my role; first placement)
2025   Matthew Davis (letter writer; TBD)
     Akanksha Vardani (letter writer; TBD)
2024   Dian Jiao (letter writer; Economist at Amazon)
     Utkarsh Kumar (letter writer; Economist at Amazon)
     Parijat Lal (letter writer; Postdoc at Columbia Business School)
2023   Kyle Coombs (letter writer; AP at Bates College)
2022   Kim Fe Cramer (letter writer; AP at London School of Economics)
     Louise Guillouet (letter writer; Economist at OECD)
2021   Ye Zhang (co-sponsor; AP at Stockholm School of Economics)
2020   Han Huynh (letter writer; Economist at Bates White)
     Suanna Oh (letter writer; AP at Paris School of Economics)
2019   Qiuying Qu (letter writer; Economist at Capital One)

Pre-docs (first placement)
2023   Muhammad Bashir (PhD at Berkeley Econ)
2021   Malavika Mani (PhD at Warwick Econ)
2019   Hamza Husain (PhD at Berkeley ARE)

Awards

2023   Long-term Faculty Exchange, Alliance Program, Columbia University – Sciences Po
2017   Padma Desai Dissertation Prize in Economic Science, Harvard University
2007 - 09 Paris School of Economics Scholarship
2003 - 05 Junior and Senior Scholarships, Cambridge University

Languages

English (native), French (fluent)