

Tribute:
Xavier Oudin
(1955-2024)



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A life trajectory: career path highlights

In this month of June, Xavier would have turned 69. Yet he left us too soon, at the beginning of the year. In addition to the great sadness we feel for his family and the colleagues who had the pleasure of partnering with him during part of his journey, we feel a sense of gratitude for his selfless dedication to collective projects. Through his enthusiasm in taking on administrative responsibilities, Xavier did much to strengthen a community of DIAL researchers and facilitated the transition to a broader partnership with the University Paris-Dauphine, resulting in the creation of a new joint research unit associating CNRS, IRD and Paris-Dauphine. He has therefore left a lasting mark on our community. We are all indebted to him. His work to broaden our understanding of the specific characteristics of labour markets in Africa and Asia through numerous publications led to significant contributions to this field of study. We would like to share a testimony here as a tribute to his memory.

If there is one trait that characterises Xavier's life trajectory, it is his geographical nomadism combined with a steady commitment to studying a limited theme from different angles. His experience beyond our borders began involuntarily, with his childhood in Algeria, and was later linked to his choices as a researcher. His scientific career took him to countries and places as diverse as Abidjan, Hanoi, Niamey, Bangkok and Chiang Mai. These choices reflected his intellectual curiosity, his passion for discovery, his search for a deep understanding of societies in developing countries and his tenacious interest in contributing to knowledge for the benefit of the poorest people. Throughout his professional life he sought to answer the key question of why and how labour markets, which are central to the economic life of peoples in such contrasting countries, adopt forms that are so unlike those we know in France and in most developed countries.

In preparation for this intellectual adventure, Xavier began by completing a traditional academic programme. In 1977, he graduated from Sciences-Po Paris and then joined the university, or rather universities, to study economics and sociology (University of Paris X-Nanterre), and assess projects carried out in developing countries (Paris I). He did his doctoral thesis (postgraduate degree at the time) in economics under the supervision of Michel Byais, which he defended in June 1985 at the University of Rennes. His thesis entitled "Informal Activities and Employment in Côte d'Ivoire: Definition and Measurement", was both the

starting point for a long intellectual journey and an opportunity to forge what would become his identity as a researcher.

During his extended stay in Abidjan (1980-1984) as a research manager for the French Ministry of Cooperation at the Ivorian Administrative Office for Planning and Industry, he faced the reality of an African country and came in contact with researchers from ORSTOM (which later became IRD). The first intellectual challenge Xavier sought to meet was to understand how a labour market works and discover its specific characteristics. As one of his brothers pointed out at his funeral, Xavier “liked to soak up distant cultures” and his interests were also linked to geopolitics, culture and music, to name a few. This diversity of interests and his background in sociology and economics made Xavier a researcher who took a holistic view of the societies he studied. This was a good match with ORSTOM’s vision and missions. He was recruited as a researcher in 1985 and was naturally integrated into the AMIRA network. This network, initiated by G. Winter, brings together INSEE statisticians and ORSTOM researchers with the aim of questioning the usual statistical categories, which are often designed in the North and imposed in the South, through the lens of the field. It was these exchanges and collaboration within the network that helped fashion the unique nature of his approach combining in-depth field knowledge with the practice of statistical surveys.

He stayed in Niger from 1987 to 1989. There he joined the *Direction de la Statistique et de l’Informatique* to help conduct surveys on the informal sector, education and training of small entrepreneurs with support from the World Bank and ILO. Based on the results from these surveys, Xavier produced documents for Nigerian public policy makers. This “grey” literature, undervalued in the French academic world, achieved one of the objectives that guided his professional life: that his research would be useful for public policy and would benefit the people he considered with empathy.

True to his nature, as someone who never shied away from a challenge, Xavier decided to change continents in 1990 with a move to Asia where he worked at the Social Research Institute of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. For four years (1990-1994), he focused on microenterprises and the institutional framework in which they operated.

Building on this experience, Xavier embarked on a new stay in Asia (1995-1999), this time in the capital of the neighbouring country, Vietnam, where he started a collaboration with the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social

Affairs. His research focused on employment and the establishment of a household observatory. This paved the way for other colleagues to carry out on-site research on the Vietnamese labour market. This was an unprecedented experience for Xavier, outside the academic world, in a country where public institutions are subject to strict political control. He wrote that “it was a difficult experience of contending with government censorship.” Discussing informal jobs “is a reality that the authorities do not like too much,” which is why he was repeatedly confronted with censorship by the authorities or bans on going out into the field. To continue his assignment in Vietnam, he had to deploy all his diplomatic skills and promote his role in training and mentoring young people by helping develop the country’s nascent community of researchers in applied economics in this country.

Upon his return to France in 1999, Xavier contributed to the establishment of the new research unit based in Montpellier on Work and Globalisation. He held a position at the University of Montpellier-I where he contributed to the Master of Advanced Studies in Public Policy and continued his research on the economy of Southeast Asia, particularly on the effects of demographic transition on labour markets and growth. Since the start of his career, it was the first time Xavier ever worked in a university setting in France. Despite being well received by the university, disagreements within his unit led Xavier to see this experience as a failure.

In 2004, Xavier returned to Thailand where he remained until 2006. He joined the Centre for Education and Labour Studies at Chiang Mai University as part of a labour and skills programme in Thailand funded by the National Research Council of Thailand. Xavier produced prolific publications during this period.

His return to the Faculty of Economic Sciences in Montpellier in 2006 with a research unit that was being dissolved was another difficult period for Xavier. He used this challenging time to author several book chapters on his stay in Thailand and resume his research. Aware of his difficulties, several of his IRD colleagues from DIAL encouraged him to join them. His arrival at DIAL in 2008 was a daunting leap into the unknown for him from both a human and disciplinary perspective. His training in political science made him doubtful about the technical acrobatics of economics, which in part inhibited his own scientific production on political economy approaches. However, as everyone agreed, his personal qualities, wealth of experience in the field, shared interest in the study of labour markets and strong involvement in the collective responsibilities (see below) helped

Xavier find his place and play a key role in developing and strengthening our research laboratory.

It was in this new setting that Xavier started what was to be his last assignment. Xavier returned to Vietnam (2012-2016) to the Centre for Analysis and Forecasting of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. He found a country that had undergone major transformation and was more favourable to research. There he developed work on the effects of demographic transition, vocational training for young people and statistical surveys on the informal economy. He became the coordinator of the NOPOOR project which was included in one of DIAL's major research areas. It was a period involving the collaborative work he had missed so much in the past.

Career path: two areas of scientific contribution

During his career, Xavier contributed to research on two key areas: on the one hand, through his writings and, on the other hand, as a research programme coordinator.

Through his writings

His list of publications includes around sixty articles and books across all media formats, and his production has developed over time. Although it varied over the course of his successive assignments, or likely *vice versa*, with new themes involving projects in new geographical areas, his work maintained a certain unity with themes of labour markets and informality. It also had a dual methodological and analytical dimension.

His initial work focused on urban informal sector in sub-Saharan Africa, first in Côte d'Ivoire, then in Niamey and to a lesser extent in Lomé. It all formed part of the AMIRA reflection group movement. It stimulated discussions on the concept of informality. After decades of trial and error, international bodies have finally agreed on a definition similar to the one he defended nearly 40 years ago: the nature of the link with the State. During this period, he maintained his value for multidisciplinary research, which only continued in the future. While taking a critical look at statistical concepts and categories, he never shied away from practical work in which he demonstrated a certain methodological eclecticism by making use of administrative files (patent registry in Abidjan) or conducting specific surveys such as the national survey on the informal sector in Niger (1987-1988).

Starting in the early 1990s, he underwent a dual transition. He broadened his focus (moving from the study of small establishments to the labour market as a whole), and changed fields (from francophone West Africa to Southeast Asia). His two successive assignments, both in Thailand (ten years apart) and Vietnam (nearly twenty years apart), in a context of rapid growth, made him very attentive to long-term dynamics. He particularly focused on the effects of demographic transition, to which he attributed a key but underestimated role, in the structural transformation of the labour market and informality, which, despite economic growth, continued to develop, through informal (unprotected) employment in the formal sector. With this same time perspective, his analysis of intra- and intergenerational occupational transitions, with the discovery of massive shifts from formal to informal employment, despite increasingly porous borders, led him to question the dualistic theory which held that formal employment was unavoidable for workers and that the informal sector was inevitably destined to disappear. He therefore confirmed, at least for these two countries, the existence of middle income trap countries. He believed that the focus on demographic transition and its pivotal indicator (the dependency ratio) should be analysed in relation to the themes of education, training and apprenticeship, and more broadly the issue of wage earners and social protection. To this end, he was working on a draft book on demographic transition in Southeast Asia, which his health problems prevented him from completing.

Throughout his career, his constant enthusiasm for the empirical foundations of applied research led him to conduct or participate in original statistical surveys. One in particular on informal employment, the first of its kind in Vietnam, led to the joint publication of a collective book, which to this day remains the key reference on this subject in France. This tropism did not prevent him from taking a critical look at the data collected, including his own, which he felt academic economists did not take sufficiently into account. This reflexivity led him to question the evolution of the profession of researcher in development economics with the increasing sophistication of micro-econometric models taking precedence over any other considerations. His approach was more in line with what Angus Deaton described as a "thick description", based essentially simple descriptive statistics techniques, which was not popular with academic journals. This is one of the reasons why his work has unfortunately remained undervalued.

Research programme coordinator

But beyond the written work he has left behind, Xavier also excelled in leading research programmes. The key to his success in this area lay in his combination of a clear vision of the scientific issues and his human qualities (see below). Due to a lack of space, we will mention only two, which crowned his career in this field.

During the last ten years of his career, Xavier played a decisive role in the DIAL community. At first glance, this partnership between a socioeconomist specialising in Southeast Asia and a laboratory for quantitative economists focused mainly on Africa may have seemed unlikely. Yet there were still a few tenuous points in common: the issue of informality, statistical surveys and Vietnam. As a team of DIAL researchers worked to develop a new programme there, Xavier became the first IRD researcher to be assigned there since reunification. He also contributed to the institute's expansion in France, which has now become one of its key anchors in the region.

In 2009, one year after joining DIAL, Xavier took over its management. The laboratory was in the midst of painful process of changing status.¹ Xavier took over this difficult situation and succeeded in carrying out this thankless task (very little recognition in the researchers' evaluations) while maintaining the team's cohesion.

The European NOPOOR programme, for which he was the scientific coordinator from 2012 to 2018, was surely the height of his career in terms of managing scientific projects. With the very ambitious goal of gaining a better understanding of all aspects of poverty and proposing avenues for public policy, the NOPOOR consortium has brought together no less than 20 academic and research institutions in 17 countries on four continents. Over 100 researchers participated in this project. His merits were not only recognized by the success of in-house appreciation, as evidenced by the various testimonies of partner researchers, he also received a formal award. Xavier received the *Stars of Europe* Trophy in December 2018 for his great investment in this project. The trophy rewards the best project coordinators and their research teams for their European work.

¹DIAL, which was both an Economic Interest Group bringing together IRD, INSEE and AFD, and a research unit of IRD, was to change into a joint research unit of IRD and Paris-Dauphine University.

The man behind the research: a sensitive approach

Xavier's brother Gérard described him as a restless spirit. In his words, "his unique behaviour and ideas distinguished him from his siblings." He remembers Xavier at the age of 3 or 4 as having "a beautiful round face, red hair, always smiling, a prankster, adorable with an easy-going personality that he kept throughout his life". These personality traits remained him throughout his life, which ended too soon. Years later, these qualities would also facilitate his integration into a group of researchers whom he initially perceived as outside his options as a researcher. Yet he also had another quality that made discussions with him easy and rewarding. During family meetings, his brother continues, "he was critical, but his criticism was well-meaning, never sharp or angry. He had no prejudices, he knew how to remain objective."

All those who have worked with Xavier observed these same qualities in his professional life, including his French colleagues from IRD, Paris-Dauphine and those from Vietnam, Peru, Madagascar and Brazil. His passing came a shock for all his DIAL colleagues and friends, even though they were aware that he was very ill. Xavier embodied tranquillity, discretion, humility and moderation. It was largely because he brought all these qualities together that we called on him to lead DIAL, which he did for over two years.

He also took on the enormous responsibility of leading the European NOPOOR project from start to finish and, once again, was able to unite everyone's efforts to make this project a success. Jean-Marc Siroen, head of the Dauphine team, with whom he worked in tandem, testifies to the fact that during Xavier's five years leading NOPOOR, he was able to take on the agonies of EU bureaucracy and accomplish the challenging task. In his words, "I had the opportunity and pleasure of travelling with him to every continent (except Oceania and the poles) where he organised wonderful and very serious symposiums and seminars with teams that were friends of the consortium." This feeling is shared by all those who worked with him on this project. They remember him "for his gentleness, for staying calm in stressful situations, his patience and his great kindness with people."

Xavier was a music lover and passed this love on to his children. He liked to talk about music while having a drink with friends at the end of the day, often surrounded by younger members of the DIAL team who loved his openness, warmth and simplicity as well as his sense of humour. His commitment to passing on his knowledge and field experiences was highly

appreciated by young students whether they were in Hanoi, Montpellier or Paris.

The moral support he received from Danielle, his lifelong companion who accompanied him everywhere, including on his adventures in Africa and Asia, was a source of energy and a haven of peace for Xavier that protected him in sometimes hostile environments.

We are sad to no longer see the friendly smile that he always had, in all circumstances, to no longer be able to talk to him, with whom it was so easy to spend time together, to confide in, in the office or over coffee, and not to be able to tell him what a key role he has played for DIAL, for the unity and smooth operation of our research unit and for the success of various joint projects. We all regret not having told him enough just how much we appreciate all his personal qualities.

The European Union awarded him the *Stars of Europe* award. For his friends and colleagues, he will remain a star that will shine forever. Xavier left us too early and once again he left so quietly. To Xavier, lover of Brittany and the sea air, we say Godspeed!

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