



Global Donor Platform
for Rural Development

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Global Donor Platform for Rural Development segment - Interview transcript

[Starts at 55-minute mark on podcast]

Tristan Armstrong (Senior Program Officer in Agricultural Development at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Tristan is also a co-chair of the Platform.)

Welcome to the first of our three-part miniseries from the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development which is currently hosted by IFAD. We are going to hear from leaders in the donor world about the issues that matter to them.

The Platform is a network and partnership of 40 influential donors including international development agencies, financial institutions, intergovernmental organizations and foundations.

The membership aims to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, through collective influencing and knowledge sharing, so that donors can successfully lobby for policies and increased funding in agriculture and rural development.

In this first interview, we are taking you to Canberra, Australia to speak with Tristan Armstrong, Senior Sector Specialist of Agricultural Development and Food Security, at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Our reporter Michelle Tang asked Tristan about what keeps him up at night.

Tristan Armstrong: First and foremost, I guess really other impacts of climate change and how we see them playing out around the world at the moment.

I guess every person listening to this podcast today probably has their own powerful story about climate change. I can't think of a part of the world that hasn't been impacted and isn't currently being impacted by climate change in some way or other.

Here in Australia, we are currently experiencing some of the worst flooding in our history. We've got tens of thousands of people who have been displaced and massive impacts to natural and agricultural systems. And this is happening as a direct consequence of climate change related extreme rain fall events.

Every time one of these floods occurs in Australia, in over the last five years, I hear commentators saying, you know, this is a one in 100-year event. When you start hearing that every year you realise something is wrong.

Two years ago, it wasn't flooding, it was fire. Australia was gripped by our worst ever fire season. In a single summer we lost an area of forest the size of Germany. Just think about that.

Here in Canberra in the nation's capital, we were surrounded by burning forest for four months. We had the worst air pollution of any city in the world for four months. And we're talking about a city that's usually one of the most clean and pristine in the world. So, it was a really dramatic and shocking reminder.

Our climate is warming and it's changing and that's affecting not just the biological systems around us, but our agricultural systems. The ability for us to grow food, the ability.

For us to remain food secure as a community, things are bad in Australia but they're even worse in the Pacific.

You know we are working with some countries and some communities that are literally losing their land to the sea. As sea levels rise, these are people who have lived on islands in the Pacific for thousands of years and their homes are simply being swallowed up.

They can no longer practise their traditional agriculture. They can no longer eat their traditional foods. In many areas, people have no choice but to import unhealthy food from far away across the world. Because there is simply nothing else to eat on their islands.

In Australia, we're helping to establish new forms of agriculture above the ground, away from the saline soil and safe from the waves.

You know, of course, the other thing that keeps me up at night, Michelle, is the conflict in Ukraine.

Apart from the direct and tragic human consequences that we're seeing, this is happening at a time when the price of food has actually been going up. Now for more than a year, this underlying inflation that we're seeing in the price of energy and food reflects a range of factors and not, not least the incredibly the incredibly disruptive impacts of the COVID pandemic on our food system and the supply chains that link us all together.

We're already in many parts of the world at a point in time where food is really very unaffordable for a lot of people, and this this conflict and the impacts of this conflict not just on the direct supply of staple crops, but on the price of the inputs to fertiliser and energy, which really drive global agriculture going to have a profound impact.

Seeing that inflation go up will potentially lead to widespread suffering, particularly for the world's poorest and for those who have sadly already been displaced by conflict and climate change.

Let's see how this plays out, but my sense is that we are closer than perhaps we have ever been in the last 15 years to a major food security crisis. Here in Australia, alongside other leading donors, we're certainly watching the situation closely and beginning to prepare for whatever eventuality comes to pass.

GDPRD/Michelle Tang: What is being done about these fast-changing issues, especially in tackling climate change by way of transforming our food systems?

In short Michelle, not nearly enough. As a global community, we urgently need to build more resilient and less destructive agricultural systems.

Not only is agriculture being massively and disproportionately impacted by direct effects of climate change, but it's also one of the greatest contributors to the prob.

We need to ensure that we change the way we engage with this planet as a global community. We, in the developed world need to pay the real price for the food that we eat and we need to create policy settings that sustain productive capacity of the planet rather than provide incentives to destroy things simply because it's making a profit.

You know, for people we can no longer afford to have a short-term mindset when it comes to investment decisions in the land sector and in agriculture.

We need to be thinking long term. We need to be thinking collectively. We need to be ensuring that the incentives are in place to promote better and more responsible behaviour.

We're helping people with more targeted and efficient use of agricultural inputs, better access to finance and improved market opportunities. But we really need to do a whole lot more in that space and so I think Australia and other donors are really beginning to think much more deeply about this and realising that you know we are not going to achieve impact at a global scale unless we work much smarter and much more closely with one another to see change happen.

There's also so much more that we can do to improve. You know other elements of our agricultural system, bio security. We're seeing pests and diseases move around the planet more quickly, particularly under the influence of climate change.

We have the technology; you know we need to share that technology more effectively. We need to work much better collectively to really strengthen our distance the use of agricultural chemicals and other ways in which we can improve the regulatory system to protect people in the environment.

These are things that we know we can do now. Last but certainly not least, I think, is the huge issue of food loss and waste that still represents the biggest single low hanging fruit.

In terms of reducing the impact of agriculture on the planet, we can't wait for these things just to fix themselves, we need to take action. We need to take initiative and we need to work together to do that.

GDPRD/Michelle Tang: You are also Co-Chair of the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development, which is a network and partnership of global donors. How does this role complement with your work in climate change?

Tristan Armstrong: As obviously the name suggests, here in the Platform, our core focus is rural development. We in the Platform have been bringing together key global donors for almost 20 years.

Around these issues, we meet and exchange information. We also ensure that these issues are high on the political and development agendas of our respective governments and of the global community.

Co-chairing the Platform allows me to work closely with many other donors and networks such as ours. It can play a key role in coordinating and influencing donor action and this could ultimately make a difference not just in my work tackling rural development and climate change in the Southwest Pacific and Southeast Asia, but for all of our members and the work that they do in their own communities and their own region.

IFAD/Brian Thomson: That was Tristan Armstrong, Senior Sector Specialist of Agricultural Development and Food Security, at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Australia.

Next month, they'll be talking to Carin Smaller from the International Institute for Sustainable Development and Ammad Bahalim from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

You can find out more about the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development at www.donorplatform.org.