**Global Donor Platform
for Rural Development**

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Global Donor Platform for Rural Development segment - Interview transcript

Claire Melamed (Chief Executive Officer, Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data – GPSDD)

GDPRD Secretariat/Michelle Tang: Claire, thank you so much for joining us on the global donor platform for Rural Development segment in the IFAD podcast. It's a real pleasure to have this conversation with you today. We start all our segments wanting to know the same thing and that is what are the issues that keep you up at night.

Claire Melamed: Thank you. It's great to be here and I'm very excited for this conversation.

I've recently been doing a lot of travelling, so I've been in sort of lots of different time zones, and so it doesn't take much to keep me up at night

It's always for me a debate between my inner optimist and my inner pessimist. I want to think the best of people and feel that new opportunities are exciting and positive and in the world of data that's not hard. We're seeing amazing new things all the time.

Satellite imagery that can give us a real time picture of what's happening to the earth and, incredible opportunities for people to feed into data through new technologies and so on.

But of course, with that comes huge risks and the thing that I worry about is whether inadvertently we are reproducing the inequalities that we see all around us in these new digital systems and reproduce.

One of the things that caught my eye recently, the new open AI chatbot chatGPT, is kind of all over the news and some of the concerns about the potential for that technology to be abused was to recruit a lot of workers in Kenya, for example, to monitor the platform. Some journalists found that those workers are not being paid very much at all compared.

I worry about whether all of us who involved in different ways are doing enough individually, organizationally to make sure that we're not just reproducing the mistakes of the past, but actually doing something which is going to create that sort of better future that we all know is possible but won't happen unless we actively try to make it.

Michelle: Thank you for sharing that. And for pointing out issues behind data that may not be immediately obvious. People often think that data is boring. Now, what would you say to that?

Claire: Well, data can be boring. There's no point in pretending that it's not.

What we perhaps forget is that actually we're all using data and absorbing data all the time. During the pandemic, we all became experts in the R number, and we were pouring over the figures every day about infection rates in different countries.

Data is a tool and it needs to be used by individuals, by governments, by powerful institutions.

The way to make data interesting is to not talk about the data, but to talk about what it's used for and how it can improve lives and to relate that to things that people really care about all the time.

Michelle: Could you share some of the stories behind what the data in agriculture and food systems is telling us? And why is that important to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals and in making progress in rural development?

Claire: Data can enhance the stories that we tell us about the situation of the world and the people in it.

We perhaps read a story about one person who is facing hunger, who is facing insecurity. We're moved by that story, but we don't know, is that just one person or is that the whole world?

We need data to put our stories into context and to understand what to do about it.

And of course, we know on food and agriculture that the data is not going in the right direction.

349 million people now across 79 countries are facing acute food insecurity this year In 2023 and that's 62 million more people than two years ago.

Michelle: Yes, those numbers are definitely not telling the story we want to hear.

Claire: But the data can also show us some places where things are perhaps looking slightly more optimistic, or at least where people are acting to change those numbers and point us towards some of the solutions.

In Senegal, satellite data has helped the government to understand where different agricultural activity is going on across the country, different climatic zones that people are facing and it's helped make the whole agricultural system more resilient in the face of the climatic pressures.

In Kenya, there's been a groundbreaking collaboration between the private and public sectors and that's led to a food security dashboard that's helped the government understand where food aid needs to go, where supply chains have been disrupted during the pandemic, and help tackle some of those food insecurities.

Data also allows us to relate different things to each other. We know data on worsening food security reflects the impact of climate, it reflects disruptions caused by the war in Ukraine. Data helps us to understand, in any given situation, what is the driver and how are these different things intertwined. And how can we build that kind of resilience to shocks that you need that only comes by addressing different areas of policy all at the same time.

Michelle: How does working with a platform like the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development fit into this bigger picture of having accessible, accurate and timely data?

Claire: I think donor platforms and donor coordination is absolutely critical. Data costs money and some of the new technologies in particular that are available require upfront investment costs and training to be able to realize the benefits and we know the reality is that in many countries, donors are at least going to be part of the story in helping governments to realize the benefits of data that exists.

The Global Donor Platform is a really good example of this, donors treating data not just as a kind of necessary requirement of any individual project or program, but a strategic cross cutting issue.

Michelle: Could you give us an example of this approach?

Claire: During COVID, we worked with Somalia to develop that for in training the National Statistics Office to use satellite imagery combined with other kinds of data to form a much more accurate picture of the population of the vulnerabilities.

We trained people, we made sure they had access to the imagery. And that meant that some months later when the tropical cyclone hit, they were able to use exactly the same skills, the same data to manage some of the humanitarian needs and response from the cyclone.

It's about that sort of strategic investment in systems that can then pay off again and again, that's why mechanisms that broker collaboration within sectors like the global donor platform are so critical to make sure that all of the different investments are adding up to support for the whole system that will then pay off again and again across sectors and help to strengthen data systems.

It's also just great value for money for donors. We did some research that showed that for every $1.00 that's invested in data, we can expect a return of about $32.

It's absolutely challenging for donors, but it's very much worth their while to get this right.

Michelle: Claire, thank you so much. And we look forward to following your organization's work at www.data4sdgs.org. The Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data.