



Global Donor Platform
for Rural Development

IFAD Podcast | EP46 – July/August 2023

Global Donor Platform for Rural Development miniseries

Conversation with

Jo Puri (Associate Vice-President, Strategy and Knowledge Department, IFAD)

Secretariat/Maurizio Navarra: What are the issues that keep you up at night?

Jo Puri: Thanks, Maurizio.

The current issue that keeps me up awake at night and I think also adheres very closely to the professional decisions that I've taken in my life, are the extent to which we don't think about evidence and data when we are trying to inform our decisions.

It's almost unethical that organizations and the International Space, but also the national policies in most countries, do not take into consideration data to really understand what's going on the ground, and it's unethical because with every decision that we are making with respect to money and what we're investing on, we are essentially also making the decision to not invest in something else, right?

Data and evidence are really the important thing that help us understand the tradeoffs between our policies. Until we start to ensure that that becomes a discipline and a cynic, and on for our decision making, I will continue to have sleepless nights.

Maurizio: The second question flows very well with your first answer. Data and evidence-based decisions are at the heart of your career as Head of Strategy and Knowledge at IFAD. What role does data play in achieving zero hunger and in transforming our food systems?

Jo: Great question and this is one of the key things that really attracted me about IFAD. Which is that IFAD is committed to using, to producing, as well as using data for a lot of its decisions.

We use data, as Head of Strategy and Knowledge, essentially, my team and I lead on all of the technical designs of the investments that we do on the ground, but when we design those investments, we use data to understand what works and what doesn't and what are the tradeoffs.

Just to give you an example we're currently working in, and I'm just back from Belize and Honduras

The important thing is to recognize that even though these are Central American economies, large sections of populations there are essentially hungry and malnourished.

But what we know, for example, in these economies, is not so much providing them with emergency or humanitarian assistance to get them out of hunger today.

What is really important is recognizing, and this comes from data from polycrisis over and over again, is that we know rural people who had access to markets were able to deal with COVID, with the price hikes that we saw as a consequence of the Ukraine war. That analysis of data helps us to understand what the focus of our investments on the ground should be when we are designing investments in these countries.

Our focus has been on developing access to local markets and infrastructure for local markets because we know that when we build local markets, we are providing rural poor people a way to be resilient in the medium and long run.

One example is the impact assessments that IFAD does. If that looks at 15% of overall investments and does counterfactual driven impact assessments. That is, we try and say what would have happened without IFADs investments and what happens as a consequence of IFADs investments.

The latest impact assessments showed that we were able to increase the improved economic mobility and reduce poverty by more than 26% amongst the people we are working with, so we are able to measure it and know what the standard error associated with it is. We know where we are working, but also where we are not able to be successful.

Maurizio: Thanks Jo. You just touched on what IFAD is doing in the area of data. So, how is the fund working with others up and down the value chain?

Jo: One is of course the fact that we host the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development and we see that as a very important part of the overall spectrum of our engagement with respect to data and evidence because it shows our commitment to coordination.

So, it's not just sufficient to produce the data, and that's where IFAD has really put its money where its mouth is with respect to using data.

We work with FAO, as part of the 50 by 2030 initiative, as well as with the World Bank. The World Bank is really responsible for data production, FAO for data analysis, and IFAD for data use.

And that's important because we do think that different organizations have different strengths and with our engagement in the country, we are able to take forward a lot of the work that we do with data use.

We also work with many foundations with a lot of donors, so the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and, of course, with our country teams, so we engage with most countries, and we work with their planning and monitoring and evaluation ministries or departments to ensure that we are able to bring in data into their decision making when we are investing in these countries.

Last but not least, we also ensure that when we put together country strategies, that we are able to insert the overall importance of data and data use into their own thinking as well.

Maurizio: You just mentioned the issue of data use, now data we all know is useless unless it is used. In your view how do we make this a reality?

Jo: As with all behavior, we need not just the nudges, but we need the incentives. We need the carrots and the sticks, right?

When I was at the Green Climate Fund, the first question asked of me when I was heading the evaluation office was, isn't this too early for us to be thinking about data and evidence given that we are still starting off with our investments.

But the key thing with data is that you've got to plan for it at the beginning, and you've got to put it into the DNA of every investment, the overall objective of producing, collecting, and analyzing data.

We were able to work very closely with the board of the GCF to ensure that data production and use was going to be a very important part of the overall evolution of the GCR.

It can be the stick. Donors have to come and insist that yes, for everything that they're investing in, they need to have good data. Bad data is worse than no data. So, not just data, but good data to be produced that have good metadata, good protocols, good disciplines, good training of the teams.

IFAD is both a donor as well as a recipient. When we go out and work with governments, we insist that this discipline is inserted into all the investments we do. But we also ask the donors to wear that responsible hat and to push us as well. If we don't do it nobody else will.

Maurizio: Our final question for you, Jo, what is the one message you would like our listeners to walk away with and why?

Jo: If you don't measure it, you don't treasure it. And I think the why part is quite clear.

Maurizio: Thanks a million, to Jo Puri, Associate Vice President of the Strategy and Knowledge Department at IFAD.

Jo: Thank you very much, Maurizio. That was great.