**IFAD Podcast | EP47 - August 2023**
***Global Donor Platform for Rural Development miniseries***

**Podcast with**

**Jaron Porciello**
*Co-Director, Hesat2030 & Associate Professor, University of Notre Dame*

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

**Jaron:** I would say inequality is probably the thing that keeps me up at night, in our food systems, our education, our health, much more broadly as well, personal health and safety.

What helps me get back to sleep is when I look around and particularly at my two young children and the way I see them interacting with the world, the kinds of questions they're asking and the ways in which they just believe that equality is an inherent right.

When I look at the younger generation and see how much they care about the environment, about other people, there's a lot of compassion in the world.

I think the issues of inequality obviously manifest in AI as well, and what really gives me a lot of hope is all of the conversations that are happening across different stakeholders.

**Maurizio: Artificial intelligence is the hot topic these days. What could you tell us about the state of AI at the moment, - the good, the bad, and the ugly?**

**Jaron:** It's been a roller coaster the last six months. I like to joke that I start my day by answering emails and colleagues' questions about the great things about AI but I end my day with those same questions where people are saying, isn't this a doomsday prophecy? The truth is somewhere in between.

Let's start with the good. This has brought about phenomenal conversations between businesses, governments, different stakeholders, and certainly the research community. We are seeing organizations coming together and they're having practical conversations about things like bias in machine learning models, quality and quantity and availability and who owns the data.

There's a lot of good conversations happening about how to regulate this technology, which I think are long overdue conversations in some ways. Large language models and in particular transformer models, have been around for more than five years, I use them every day in my work.

What's different about what's happening now is that there's an application for people to see how large language models work. So this expression of AI that people are concerned about it's really good because it brings those conversations together.

What is not so good is we're seeing a lot of fear and rhetoric around the language of AI. You might have seen an open letter called "the future of AI" that was put together by primarily business leaders that calls for six months pause in the development of AI.

If you think about it, that's a little crazy. Number one - How do you measure if development and progress are moving too fast? Second part of the question - is this pause just to let businesses catch up to figure out how to monetize this? There are also hints that companies will be looking at the role of artificial intelligence to replace current human jobs, and I think the way that this is being expressed in the media is causing a lot of fear and anxiety as well.

**Maurizio: With such an important and somewhat complicated conversation going on, how do you think AI could potentially change and have an impact on global food systems?**

**Jaron:** Agriculture was one of the first sectors to adopt AI technology. If you look in terms of how remote sensing works, it's been in the pipeline for quite some time.

An easy example is tractors that work on farmer's land are constantly collecting data as they go through, and they harvest, and they till, and they do all kinds of processing. Data is coming into those systems and AI is helping the farmer make real time decisions on precision inputs, so AI in terms of global food systems, we've been heading there for quite some time.

What I think is different in the landscape is: with the introduction of any new technology, what's going to happen on the back end in terms of corporate ownership, who's going to own different parts of this technology?

The agricultural sector has a lot of lessons learned from seed technology that we can apply to thinking about how we consider ownership of different assets, and this information that we've learned in food systems is broadly applicable and can be useful to decision makers as they're thinking about regulations of the technology.

**Maurizio: You were one of the Co-directors of Ceres 2030, a unique research project that presented a real evidence-based world map calling to double food-related aid to end hunger by 2030. Now Hesat2030 is the next phase of this program. Could you tell us more about what Hesat2030 is, and where it aims to take us next.**

**Jaron:** We're really excited about Hesat2030, the global road map to end hunger sustainably and nutritiously.

As the Global Donor Platform for Rural Development knows well because they've been a key stakeholder as well as a key community partner with this effort, we know that not enough is being done in agriculture if we're only looking at food security.

Hesat2030 is really working from the baseline that we contributed with Ceres 2030 to better understand the donor share of how to increase and improve the efficiency of ODA.

But now we really need to update both many parts of the global modeling exercise as well as the evidence as well as the outreach with the global community to ensure that we are bringing in nutritious diets, factors of climate change.

And that we're really thinking about that as in the core essential goal for food security.

So in Hesat2030, similar to the work we did in Ceres 2030, the community of stakeholders is really, really important to us.

What's different to Hesat2030 is that we're not focused on kind of one key exercise. Ceres was organized around a global modeling effort as well as special publication with Nature Research.

Hesat2030 is a more diffuse. We're looking to update global modeling and evidence exercises over time. And one of the key reasons for this is because some of our stakeholder groups, like the SDG 2 Donors Roadmap Working Group, we need information faster. We need to shorten that gap for the global knowledge value chain. Information that comes out every three years, even if it's the best quality, may not be frequent enough.


**Maurizio: Before our last question, I am curious about what inspired you to take on this professional path?**

**Jaron:** Something not a lot of people know about me is that I was formerly a comedy writer and I also studied literature. I started a PhD programme in English literature, and I quickly realized I couldn't spend most of my professional life looking at the past. What I'm really interested in is looking at the future. At the same time, I love text. So my work focuses on textual analysis.

My career path has been nontraditional. But I've always been interested in what's the next question, not necessarily what's the goal, and that has taken me through now, almost 20 years of getting to work in international agriculture and rural development and asking the next question.


**Maurizio: If there is one message you would like our listeners to walk away with, what would it be and why?**

**Jaron:** Artificial intelligence is actually just intelligence, and it is human intelligence. Every input that goes into a model has originated with human ideas.

When we get concerned about AI, it's helpful to think that it's not actually AI we're concerned with. It's what people can do with technology, and this is a problem that humanity has faced forever.

What happens when technology goes too far? Fortunately, I put my faith back in human and collective intelligence. We as humans have control over what goes into the models, how we regulate these things and the discussions that we're having with each other.