Excerpts from an interview with Paul-Edouard Clos, Head of Private Sector & Climate Finance Unit, Senior Counsel, Legal Department - International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

conducted in spring 2025 by Gabriella Cohen, Lou Ducarteron, Alice Gales, Ewa Jarosz, Giorgia Ravera and Katharina Reisenbauer.

So basically, the great green wall, you have several regional projects on it. So it's a way to call it the great green wall, but there are several projects. So there's one that's called SD3C, which is a joint-style program. There's one that's called EGRIM, which is the Africa Climate Risk Financing Program. There is one that's called IGREENFIN, that involves 10 countries. And then there's a regional support program. And then we are doing IGREENFIN 2 - IGREENFIN was in the west part, and IGREENFIN 2 is in the east part. So all these projects are regional.

They are financed by different parties and implemented by different parties as well. So usually, you do that in partnership with, for example, WFP, African Development Bank. You can receive funds from the Green Climate Fund, the Islamic Development Bank. You can put your own funding. And the size of the transaction is from like $40 million to $200 million per regional project. So because it's regional, at the end of the day, you will have, you know, a loan or a grant provided to a country, to different countries because it's a regional project. So separate loans.

You will have implementation arrangements that involve, let's say, key partners in the country, but also a certain setup because it's regional. [...] So for example, you will have capacity building activity, infrastructure, conflict management, climate risk reduction, climate risk transfer, innovation ecosystem, knowledge management. You can have a lot of activities that are financed through grants or loans to the states. So that's what we do.

And then we want to basically target smallholder farmers, households, small farmers, a huge number. And what we try to achieve is to increase their resilience. And we involve them at the design of the project and also during the implementation of the project. So you have different groups of people, smallholder farmers, right? Different types in this area. And you involve them, you have a participatory approach, right? And you involve them because they will be the beneficiary or they will act in the implementation. They will form some groups and we help them to be structured as a group, you know? They act like, let's say, more as a community or a tribe. And sometimes it's difficult to involve some of the group, right? So you can have resistance from the group because you want to do the good in one area and the other group doesn't like it.

Because you are, for example, building a huge barrier, a green barrier, right? So you are doing some kind of plantation, you know, of an ecosystem. But, for example, you will

have a tribe that was used to crossing this area with some sheep and selling them in the south and it pissed them off to have this kind of natural barrier. Or if they cross, they will eat the grass and it will annoy the guy, right? So you need to think about all of this community and their history and what you want to do.

So how exactly do you set this participatory approach up? Like what are the forums where you speak to these people? Do you have any sort of structured meetings? How does it work?

So, it's extremely structured, you have different actors that you can mobilize. There can be a mayor of a village, a chief of a tribe; it can also be NGOs that act as an interface, because they are involved for a long time. You have consultants that you pay through the program to organize that and to explain what the project would do, the impact, but also how they can benefit from the project.

[...] And if you do that, particularly in zone of conflict, this is the best way to involve the community, as opposed to the central government, because you can imagine that there's a huge disconnect between the capital, and this remote, you know, challenging area that has, that has desertification, So you can see that the community, the beneficiary, you know, they are the core, they are the center of the project. [...] A lot of setback that happened, in fact, was because there was not enough involvement with the community to, for example, preserve the area, the trees, you know, to water the trees, what to do with it, right, so, so, there were some setbacks, as you know, in this project, was so, because maybe the community was not involved enough, you know, it's very costly to do this, and there is no, there is no return, in the sense that you are not creating something that will generate a huge amount of income, right? So that's why you have a lot of grant there.You give the money to the state, you ask some donors, let's say France and stuff, and you help them, and then the state doesn't have to reimburse that, and then you help them to survive the reality. It's not generating a lot of growth, like other areas. It's really like you help them to adapt and to survive in a very difficult area. [...]

Most of the areas, it's extremely complicated, most of it, so in general it's complicated, right? But you can see that there was some development when you see, you know, the progress of the GGW. Usually, this progress has been concentrated in some countries and in some areas, and it's a mix of factors. Also sometimes the government had capacity, or they got more financing, or just the community embraced it.

Oh! You had consultants, right?

Top-notch consultants helping the community to get organized. And they were absolutely fine, for example, to live five years in Senegal, and they didn't want to go to Niger. Okay, yeah. It can be a human thing, right? They sometimes got money, but nobody wants to go there, right? So, for example, IFAD, we didn't have an office in Niger, so we were just going back and forth by plane, to monitor the project, to see the community. But you can imagine, if you go two times a year, it's not the same that you have a local presence, and

you can imagine with the ecosystem of the consultant and staff, which is a resource issue in terms of capacity.

[...] So you cannot give all your money to a country that is too risky. Because, you know, they might never repay, so you need to think about, to diversify a little bit, you know. You have some loan, but you have some grant, right? Countries want grants, free money, right? But you can understand that now, with the US and what's going on, it's harder to get grant as opposed to loan, because we want some kinds of, listen, I'm giving you money, but even if it's nice, concessional, you need to give it back, right? [...]

What you're supposed to do is to be very careful that you don't reproduce the mistake of the first project but at the same time you don't have enough insight. Usually you need to step back a bit. You have an evaluation. But here, the clock is ticking. So to design it better, faster, and kind of draw some lessons, you need to criticize yourself because you don't have time to wait for an evaluator that says, okay, this is the recommendation for the future, let's do this and this because it didn't work well.

You don't have that time. So you need to have people very smart that understand and go back to the genesis of the project and understand what went wrong and fix it now. So you need to have people who are really good. You know, for these people, in the public sector, you need financing. The thing is you need to create an incentive to have the best people to handle, you know, the most complex project where in fact, there is the highest risk of failure. Because if someone wants to have a career, he doesn't do this. He will do a project in Vietnam or China, you see? So the trick is that the guy that you need is the best guy. And the best guy usually is not so, you know, he's thinking, wow, it's super risky for me to, it's a lot of work and it's very risky, right? So you need to think about that. And that's why I tell you that you need resources to attract the talent in this space, right? So for example, you know, they call you and you feel like, okay, you are motivated, you are good and stuff, but you know that it's more difficult and you want to be paid for that, right? Because otherwise you work for a project that is less complicated in Brazil, is it? Yeah, I see. So in this space, you'll usually find people that are really true believers in development and stuff like this, you know? And let's say, they don't care so much about the career. They think it's just a huge project with a huge impact, right?