Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event
AI for Food Security Forum
Opening Remarks

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CSIS EXPERTS

Enoh T. Ebong
President, Global Development Department, CSIS

Caitlin Welsh
Director, Global Food and Water Security Program, CSIS

Transcript By
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Caitlin Welsh: Good morning, everybody. Good morning. I think we'll get started.

Hello and welcome to CSIS. I'm Caitlin Welsh, director of the CSIS Global Food and Water Security Program, and I'm thrilled to welcome you to the AI for Food Security Forum.

Today's forum is years in the making and months in the planning. And it follows in-depth research by CSIS and partner organizations, many of them represented in this room, on the applications of AI for food security. It's also the result of the hard work of my entire team and teams across CSIS. So I want to thank my CSIS colleagues here at the outset for your truly excellent work. I also want to thank Google.org. (Applause.) Yes, thank you, everybody.

I also want to thank Google.org for your support for today's forum, your partnership with CSIS, and your vision in creating a community of organizations aspiring to use AI to improve global food security and helping all of us to do our work better together.

We have a fantastic lineup for today's forum, and we are so excited for what we will hear and see throughout the day. Today's forum will feature plenary panel discussions, demonstrations, and then informal networking sessions.

On the panels, we have four. The first panel will be moderated by CSIS' Franck Gbaguidi, and it will look at the ways AI is applied across food systems today and how it can be applied in the future. The second panel will be moderated by CSIS' Rob Bertram, and it will look at the challenges and opportunities regarding data in the application of AI for food security. The third panel will take a step aside and it will look at AI and food security in this geopolitical moment, exploring the ways AI could help us weather the food-system shocks brought by the Iran war and other recent global disruptions. And this panel will be moderated by Vivian Salama, staff writer and national security reporter with The Atlantic. And I will serve as an MC of sorts throughout the day, and then I will join you onstage as moderator of the fourth and final panel, which will examine what needs to happen to turn inspiration into action and to apply AI-enabled technologies for the benefit of food security for all. So those are the four panels.

And in addition to the panels, we will have – we've invited four organizations to present demonstrations of the ways that they are using AI in their work. My colleague Zane Swanson, deputy director and fellow in the CSIS Global Food and Water Security Program, will host the demos – the demos today.

And then, in addition to the four panels and the four demos, we have built in ample time for discussions among you because – for continuing the conversations that are started onstage and for networking, because we know that much of the magic that happens at gatherings like this is in the unstructured time, including coffee breaks, lunch, and the reception to which you are all invited this afternoon.

Before we get started with our programming, I'd like to make two final notes. First, I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that today the mood around AI in the United States is complex. In this forum and in all of our – all of our research generally, it's not our intention to look only at the actual and potential benefits of AI for food security but to also take a clear-eyed look at the actual and potential risks brought by AI-enabled technologies. In all of today's programming we'll address benefits alongside risks, because it's only through such conversation – such open conversation that we promote technologies that present the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people, and the policies required to enable these things.

I also want to note that in our work on AI, as in all of our work, we understand food insecurity to be a complicated challenge with roots in politics and culture and the environment and technology. So the solutions to food insecurity must come from all of those realms. No technology can solve food insecurity, but AI-enabled technologies do present never-before-seen opportunities, which is what we'll examine here today.

And finally – I keep saying I have a final few notes. (Laughs.) These are the final few notes. Just a few little notes. I mentioned that my – that today's forum is a whole-of-team effort, so I want to ask my team members to raise their hands both so I can thank them and also, so if you need anything, you know you can flag them down. So Zane Swanson, Rose Parker, Emma Curtis, Joely Virzi. (Applause.) Here's the team. Thank you so much. And if you need anything, flag them down.

Second of all, for those in the room, wi-fi, information is on the agenda. So if you need to log onto wi-fi, that information is there.

Following each panel discussion, we will welcome and strongly encourage questions from the audience. If you're here in the audience in the room and want to ask a question, raise your hand and we'll call on you as we're able to. And if you're online, please submit your question at the "ask questions here" button on the event page and we'll ask your question as we are able to.

And then, finally, emergency exits are behind me and to the right and behind you and to the right. Should the need arise, which we do not expect, please – we'll ask you to follow us and head toward the exits.

For now, though, I will ask you to follow me in welcoming to the stage Enoh T. Ebong, president of the CSIS Global Development Department. Enoh has a long career in global development, including most recently as presidentially appointed and Senate-confirmed director of the U.S. Trade and Development Agency. We're so fortunate that Enoh joined CSIS as the first president of the Global Development Department almost a year ago. And here she brings her deep infrastructure investment, jobs creation, and legal expertise for the benefit of CSIS' work on food security, water security, health security, human rights, and all related topics.

Enoh, thank you so much for joining us today. The floor is yours. (Applause.)

Enoh T. Ebong: Thank you so much, Caitlin.

I have to tell you, as I came down and opened up from the elevator and saw all of you in the lobby outside, it really was a fantastic, energizing sight. Your purpose – your buzz, really – is very inspiring. And I am really delighted to welcome you all here today, and that includes those of you who are joining us online as well. Welcome.

So I am very pleased to really kick off this gathering. You know, as you all know, the development sector is at its sharpest inflection point in its 80-year history. It is a moment of great disruption and risk. But, as with all disruption and risk, it's a moment of opportunity.

Here at GDD, our mission is to strengthen U.S. national security and global prosperity through policies that promote economic opportunity and human wellbeing. I think your gathering here today at this AI for Food Security Forum is an important demonstration of exactly that, the interconnectedness of the issues we must all address and the innovative, collaborative, and realistic ways in which we must address them.

Food Security underpins everything that we hope and strive for: human development, economic growth, and political stability. Yet, around the world food insecurity is rising. And as it does, it is not just a humanitarian crisis; it is a development, economic, and political crisis as well.

The cause of food insecurity – the causes of food insecurity are complex and no one sector or technology can solve it alone. As Caitlin just said, AI is not a silver bullet. But it does offer real untapped potential generating novel tools and solutions, improving existing ones, and connecting them in new ways. It's precisely what we are trying to do in the development space writ large.

So your success here today can help inform an entire sector on how it builds anew and how it builds for a sustainable future. No pressure. (Laughter.)

Today we'll hear how AI is applied across several possibilities, from early warning systems that can improve anticipatory action to end hunger before it begins; to guidance that gets better information into the hands of farmers who feed the world; to crop-bearing technologies that produce higher-yielding, more resilient crops for an incredibly, increasingly unpredictable world.

Today's forum also reflects how CSIS integrates its approach to complex global challenges, bringing together the recent work of the Global Food and Water Security Program and the expertise of the Economic Security and Technology Department, which has helped shape the global conversation on AI policy for several years.

This time is ripe for this conversation. Google.org's AI Collaborative for Food Security has built a remarkable global network of organizations working at the forefront of AI applications to food-security challenges. We are thrilled that you will hear from representatives across that network today. Our sincere thanks to Google.org for your partnership, your support, and for the foresight with which you have built this community of researchers and practitioners.

Finally, my thanks to Caitlin Welsh, Zane Swanson, and the entire Global Food and Water Security team for, really, this most excellent agenda. It is thoughtful, practical, and instructive to all of us as we navigate a complex landscape. Thank you also to the wonderful CSIS ecosystem that clicks into high gear to make an event like this happen.

I look forward to hearing what emerges from your discussions. Thank you, and I wish you a most productive and enjoyable day. Thank you so much. (Applause.)

Ms. Welsh: All right. Thank you so much, Enoh, for your framing remarks, which are really perfect for setting the stage for interesting and impactful discussions that we'll have throughout the day here. I think we're a little

bit ahead of time, and that's a good thing at the start of a day as long as ours.

I want to say it's my distinct pleasure to introduce our first plenary panel discussion, "Enhancing Global Food Systems with AI," and to welcome Franck Gbaguidi to the stage. Franck is managing director for global environment and sustainability at Eurasia Group. And we are also delighted that Franck is senior associate, nonresident, in the CSIS Global Food and Water Security Program.

At Eurasia Group, Franck helps public- and private-sector organizations navigate risks and opportunities related to climate, water, biodiversity, plastics, the environment, agriculture, and forestry. I don't know if I missed anything, but – (laughter) – just a small portfolio. (Laughs.) Franck's work is multisectoral and his purview is global. I won't ask you how many places you've been to just in this one week, but his work is multisectoral. His purview is global. And for this reason, we thought that he would be the perfect person to lead our first panel discussion of the day, which is going to look at the multitude of ways AI is applied across food systems today and how it could benefit food security in the future.

Again, we're very, very grateful Franck was able to make it. I think he gets the award for one of the longest commutes. He flew in, I think, from Paris to join us for this – for this forum. So thank you so much, Franck, for being with you – for being with us. It's great to have you. Welcome. The floor is yours.

(END.)