



## Pioneers of the Planet

### Episode 10: Neth Danno

Merim Tenev -Hello from the United Nations here in New York, I'm Merim Tenev. Is community based conservation possible? And what is the connection with the development of plant genetic resources? Here with the answer is Neth Dano. She is an independent researcher who has extensive experience with development work especially on those issues. Neth Dano is an associate of Third World Network, working mainly on agriculture and bio-safety, climate change, sustainable development and environmental governance. She gained substantial experiences in policy advocacy and lobbying on issues surrounding intellectual property rights, access to genetic resources and community rights. She is an author of numerous publications. Hello and welcome! What triggered you to do what you do Neth?

Neth Dano – I would say it's a lifetime passion; I grew up in Manila, in the periphery of China Town, or Old Manila, so I didn't know rural areas, I didn't know farms until I went to university. I actually went to the University of the Philippines, enrolled in development studies, which really brought me to the rural areas, and I discovered my passion; that this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. Working with farmers, really contributing and sharing my gift in promoting farmers issues and advocating for farmers issues and most of all doing research that would benefit farmers. So going back to your question, it's mainly the passion to be able to be involved directly in rural development work.

Merim Tenev – And what exactly is rural development work? How can you be involved in such kind of work?

Neth Dano – Well to do rural development, you do community development in rural areas. In particular by leading green farmers, by integrating in farming communities, doing what they do, just being there, being part of their struggles and doing everything that a farming family would do! Like when I was still in the university and I also did this throughout my career in development my work in rural development issues, that we go to rural communities and indigenous communities,

live with these communities, live with farmers, stay there for months and weeks, learning about their situation, knowing their problems, helping out in coming up with solutions, supporting them in their struggles. Like we would help indigenous communities when I was in university to draft petition papers or even letters to local government to bring their issues to the attention of government and also facilitating their links with other cultural extension workers, with government workers, also with NGOS, to be able to address their concrete needs in the communities. And it's not an easy job because especially when I was starting in this work, it was the height of militarization, right after the people power revolution. So people, development workers, people from outside the communities who are engaged in communities, in helping communities are always suspected of being a communist guerrilla or a supporter of the communist insurgency. So it's not easy; we risk our lives, we risk our limbs and we risk the prospect of profitable careers.

Merim Tenev – Tell me more about the risks that you have to take in your life?

Neth Dano – Yeah very risky. Especially if you're involved in community work; I remember my mother would always have sleepless nights thinking where was I, where was I sleeping, what kind of life do I live in rural communities, particularly in indigenous communities, particularly in militarized zones, like walking for hours just to reach indigenous communities and villages and living the way they live, without electricity, without sanitation, without toilets; that's the easiest part without toilets! Because you have the rest of the outside house as your toilet!!

Merim Tenev – And which is the hardest part?!

Neth Dano – And of course risking health, not as we know in urban areas. I've experienced fetching water from streams and waiting for the brown mud to settle in your glass before you can drink your water because the mud will have to settle by virtue of gravity. And you drink the water slowly so as to not disturb the mud and you drink clean water because it's not brown and of course I'm taking a bath with nature, so the little comforts that you have in urban areas are the basic risks that you have to go through. It's a risk because especially if you're not used to that kind of life you could get sick; luckily I did not, maybe I have that natural immunity to all that but it really opened my mind and my heart to what do I want to do with my life? I want to help, I want to share my gifts with these people, to be able to promote their interests

and to be able to help in advancing their interests and in particular in the policy area. When I went into this work I discovered that my gift is towards policy advocacy, towards research, because I recognise that not all of us can spend the rest of our lives working and organising communities, some of us have to do other work as well, to be able to help and advance the interests of communities in a more holistic manner. So some of us have to work, up to now with communities, some of us have to do research, some of us have to advocacy and lobbying and come up with a coherent way to advance the interests of communities.

Merim Tenev – And what about your life? How has your work changed you in fact as a person? Are you more a good person? The best person because of your work?

Neth Dano – I strive to be a good person and I really think that the work that I do and the interaction that I have with people, with the faces behind the concepts of poverty and what it is to be poor has really contributed to making me into a good person. It's a continuous struggle; you don't wake up one day and say 'I'm a very good person,' it's your experiences that make you good. It's actually you who reflects on how to convert those experiences to make you a better person when you wake up tomorrow. So I exercise that being good in me, from my family and community and of course making this process contribute to the creation of a better world, and for me the best dictum is always if you have respect for yourself then it comes out automatically that you have respect for other people, regardless of their circumstances. In the work that we do we debate a lot, we argue a lot with people who don't believe what we do, but since we have respect for ourselves yes we respect their views; we're coming from different directions but definitely we are proud that we are coming from a direction that we think is right and morally correct, coming from where the people who are affected are. So it's not up there, it's not coming from the clouds, it's coming from the ground. And to us, the issues and the concepts and the rhetoric's are not just that; they have faces.

Merim Tenev – And what is the most important thing you have learnt from your work with these communities?

Neth Dano – For me the most important lesson in working with communities is that you can only be effective in your research, in your policy advocacy, in your lobbying if you have direct contact and direct exposure, experiences with living with the

people whose interests you are defending, whose interests you are serving. And so it won't do that you have the passion and the commitment and just do your research, do your advocacy, do your lobbying detached from the reality of people. You always have to go back to that. Even at this age, I'm in my early forties, I'm 41 to be exact but it doesn't really excuse me from doing community work. I continue to be involved in field research, continue to be involved in working in farms, in mountains, in forests just to be with the communities whose interests I claim to advance. So that to me is the best lesson, you can't get away with being detached from the reality.

Merim Tenev – I saw that you are here with your small daughter, what do you want to pass to her?

Neth Dano – Yes I came here with my daughters Isobel, she's 11 years old, and this is her second CSD, I brought her here a few years ago. So she's quite exposed and thinks the whole thing is boring. At first she resented the fact that you were here in the basement and it's so dark and everybody is in black. She was saying 'why is everybody in black?! And everybody talks endlessly!' So I explained it to her but she loves it better to go in the farm because I also bring her to some of my field research and she really loves it, staying in farms. She always asks me, 'what does the UN have to do with the farms?' and it's very hard to explain these concepts to a child. And once you explain it to her, she would always say 'but why would these politicians not defend the rights of farmers?' so she's quite passionate. I think the passion has been transmitted not just genetically but also in the way she lives and to me the best lesson that I always tell her is to respect yourself so you respect others and you don't do unto others what you don't want to be done unto you. And to me those are basic rules that I keep on repeating to my child because those are the basic rules that guided me in my life, in this continuing struggle towards creating a better world for her, for my daughter and for the next generation.

Merim Tenev – Can we create a better world?

Neth Dano – Yes, I believe we can. It has been quite painfully slow and sometimes we slip; we step backwards but I do think that there is no other way for us to go forward but to create a better world. And there are a lot of inspiring cases, inspiring models that are created there and that's the reason why we're here at the UN. We want to bring to the attention of governments that we're not starting from scratch. A

lot of farming communities, indigenous communities, civil society movements are creating better spaces which we can actually replicate.

Merim Tenev – It's interesting to think what is the meaning of a better world? Because the word 'world' means different things to different people.

Neth Dano – For me a better world is a place with equity, I didn't say equal but equity, at least equal chances for opportunities, equal access for opportunities. In my work, since I was in university, I've met hundreds of people, of children, who could have done better in life if only they'd had the chance to study or men and women who could have a better way to contribute in doing things; agriculture, animal husbandry, if only they were given that voice to be heard, if only they were given opportunity or equal footing in society. The way we are now, we live in a society where your circumstances, where you were born determines your future. Like if you're born in an urban poor family there is a big chance that you will be stuck there forever and your children and your grandchildren. There's very little chance to move out of that and to me that's a very personal issue; I was born in an urban poor community, we're not rich, we're not very poor, but definitely I come from a working class family and by being able to take the chance and the opportunity to take advantage of good education and striving, we managed to get out of that. And not many have that kind of opportunity. So for me social equity is essentially giving equal opportunity for all, the basic services are just education, health, social services, that to me is a better world because if we have equal opportunity for those basic services, then we would be much more aware of the bigger world. Because when you're poor and your basic need is just to eat, to look for your next meal, it is hard to think of the bigger world.

Merim Tenev – So we need a better world and we can do it. Thank you Neth Dano from the Third World Network for being with us, it was a pleasure.

Neth Dano – Thank you very much Merim.