

Food Systems Take the Stage at COP28: But Will Actions Match Rhetoric?



by Thin Lei Win



For nearly three decades, the United Nations-led climate negotiations have had a glaring hole: discussions on food systems were out of bounds. In the early years, climate action focused on emissions from the energy sector, the largest emitter, and there was a lack of understanding of food systems' role in global warming.

Food and agriculture at COP28

After years of stalemate, member states finally agreed to move forward on issues pertaining to agriculture and climate at COP23 in 2017, and a full day at this year's COP – 10 December – was dedicated to food and agriculture for the first time. A notable outcome was the COP28 UAE Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems and Climate Action, endorsed by 158 nations.¹

¹ COP28 UAE, *Declaration on Sustainable*

Nations also established the “loss & damage fund” to help poor countries already in the grip of climate change. This is particularly important in terms of the food-climate nexus, as agriculture is one of the most affected sectors from natural disasters, with an estimated 3.8 trillion US dollar worth of losses in crops and livestock production over the past 30 years.² The fund has about 700 million US dollars in its coffers so far.³

In addition, countries including Brazil, Cambodia, Norway, Rwanda and

Agriculture Resilient Food Systems, and Climate Action, December 2023, <https://www.cop28.com/en/food-and-agriculture>.

² FAO, *First-ever Global Estimation of the Impact of Disasters on Agriculture*, 13 October 2023, <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/first-ever-global-estimation-of-the-impact-of-disasters-on-agriculture/en>.

³ Nina Lakhani, “\$700m Pledged to Loss and Damage Fund at Cop28 Covers Less than 0.2% Needed”, in *The Guardian*, 6 December 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/pfn7h>.

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Sierra Leone launched the Alliance of Champions for Food Systems Transformation, committing to update their national climate plans with clear and measurable targets by COP30 in 2025.⁴

One of the most anticipated reports came from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which outlined how governments can end hunger and cut emissions from food in a fair and just manner.⁵ Nonetheless, the report does not include clear targets, seems to neglect small-scale farmers (who produce a third of the world's food), fails to incorporate nature protection goals, and pays insufficient attention to structural inequalities inherent in food systems.

Still, many experts contend that these developments deserve to be acknowledged and applauded. For example, even if the UAE Declaration is not legally binding, signing it shows governments' acknowledgment of the linkages between food systems and climate action. Similarly, the FAO Roadmap, despite its shortcomings, is the first of its kind and "akin to the IEA's Net Zero Roadmap for energy", as underlined by Edward Davey, partnerships director of the Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU) and head of the World Resources Institute's UK office.⁶

⁴ See the official website: <https://allianceofchampions.org>.

⁵ FAO, *Achieving SDG2 without Breaching the 1.5C Threshold: A Global Roadmap*, 10 December 2023, <https://www.fao.org/interactive/sdg2-roadmap/en>.

⁶ Author's online interview, 14 December 2023.

COP28 also saw a flurry of pledges and partnerships dedicated to transforming the food systems, particularly in developing countries. A non-state-actors call to action was signed by more than 150 farmers' organisations, cities, businesses and others, promising to slash emissions, transition to more diversified sources of protein and energy, and scale up sustainable approaches.⁷

The Bezos Earth Fund committed 57 million US dollars for food,⁸ some of Norway's 47 million donation to the least developed countries⁹ will go towards climate-proofing food production, and CGIAR, the world's biggest publicly-funded agricultural research network, secured more than 890 million US dollars which will be reportedly used to support smallholder farmers in low- and middle-income nations, cut farming emissions and boost access to nutritious, healthy foods.¹⁰ There were

⁷ 4SD Foundation et al., *Transforming Our Food Systems: A Call to Action*, November 2023, <https://climatechampions.unfccc.int/?p=11403>; Climate Champions, *Over 200 Non-State Actors Sign Call to Action Calling for Transformation of Food Systems for People, Nature and Climate*, 1 December 2023, <https://climatechampions.unfccc.int/?p=11796>.

⁸ BezosEarthFund, *BezosEarthFund Announces \$57 Million for the Future of Food, Supporting Bold Action for Food Systems Transformation as Part of \$1 Billion Commitment*, 1 December 2023, <https://www.bezosearthfund.org/news-and-insights/bezos-earth-fund-announces-57-million-future-of-food-bold-action-food-systems-transformation>.

⁹ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *NOK 100 Million for Climate Adaptation in the Least Developed Countries*, 5 December 2023, <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/id3016700>.

¹⁰ CGIAR, *Countries Commit USD 890 Million to Accelerate Agricultural Innovation and Address Climate and Food Crises*, 2 December 2023, <https://www.cgiar.org/news-events/>

pledges too to cut climate-warming emissions from the refrigeration for food¹¹ and a reinsurance facility for smallholder farmers affected by extreme weather.¹²

Much talk, little action

Despite all these developments, COP28 was far from an unmitigated success linking food systems and climate action.

Take the first-ever Global Stocktake (GST), for example. This is a process that analyses how country-level climate efforts are stacking up against the Paris goals every five years. After a broad coalition of civil society, food systems experts and the private sector raised concerns that an earlier draft completely ignored food systems,¹³ the final version mentions “food systems”¹⁴ (once under adaptation) but makes no reference to tackling food-related emission, which accounts for a third of total greenhouse gases.

news/countries-commit-usd-890-million-to-accelerate-agricultural-innovation-and-address-climate-and-food-crises.

¹¹ Climate Champions, *Global Cooling Pledge Sees Participants Commit to Reduce Cooling-Related Emissions across All Sectors by at Least 68 Percent Globally*, 5 December 2023, <https://climatechampions.unfccc.int/?p=11725>.

¹² One Acre Fund, *Safeguarding Smallholder Farmers in the Face of Climate Impacts*, 6 December 2023, <https://oneacrefund.org/features/one-acre-fund-re-safeguarding-smallholder-farmers-face-climate-impacts>.

¹³ WWF et al., *Response to the Latest Draft of the Global Stocktake Decision Text*, December 2023, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Fd9yEzX24Tm_vR66FFNwIg4SaD958jMbGpY3dly5LY4.

¹⁴ COP28, *Outcome of the First Global Stocktake (FCCC/PA/CMA/2023/L.17)*, 13 December 2023, <https://unfccc.int/documents/636608>.

World leaders are arguably failing to grasp the harms food systems are causing to ecosystems and human health, despite multiple reports. Current agrifood systems have eye-watering levels of hidden costs that negatively affect human health and the environment – at least 10 trillion US dollars a year or 35 billion a day,¹⁵ livestock systems constitute approximately 12 per cent of all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions;¹⁶ agricultural subsidies are responsible for 2.2 million hectares of deforestation a year;¹⁷ and food systems account for at least 15 per cent of global fossil fuels use annually.¹⁸ Meanwhile, illustrative of the other side of the coin, that is, food systems’ vulnerability to climate change, climate-induced disasters are already wreaking havoc in farming communities. Yet a shockingly low proportion of international climate finance – 3 per cent – goes to small-scale farmers.¹⁹

¹⁵ Thin Lei Win, “Hidden Figures”, in *Thin Ink*, 10 November 2023, <https://news.thin-ink.net/p/hidden-figures-300>.

¹⁶ FAO, *Pathways towards Lower Emissions: A Global Assessment of the Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Mitigation Options from Livestock Agrifood Systems*, December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc9029en>.

¹⁷ Richard Damania et al., *Detox Development. Repurposing Environmentally Harmful Subsidies*, Washington, World Bank, June 2023, p. 194, <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/39423>.

¹⁸ Global Alliance for the Future of Food, *Power Shift: Why We Need to Wean Industrial Food Systems Off Fossil Fuels*, 2023, https://futureoffood.org/ga_food-energy-nexus_report.

¹⁹ Haseeb Bakhtary, *Untapped Potential. An Analysis of International Public Climate Finance Flows to Sustainable Agriculture and Family Farmers*, Rural Forum, November 2023, <https://climatefocus.com/?p=2017>.

COP28 failed to come up with concrete actions to tackle much of the above, disappointing civil society stakeholders such as Kyle Stice, Executive Director of Pacific Islands Farmer Organizations Network, who noted that “COP28 put food on the menu, but governments left without paying the bill”, referring to the lack of meaningful financial pledges.²⁰ In fact, the money pledged so far to the loss & damage fund is less than what the world’s top five highest-paid footballers make.²¹

In addition, the only formal process through which agriculture and food systems are included in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), under whose auspices the COPs are held, did not make any headway. Negotiations on the awkwardly-titled “Sharm el-Sheikh joint work on implementation of climate action on agriculture and food security” (SSJW)²² came to a premature end on 5 December without any concrete agreement. The next talks are in June 2024.

²⁰ Laura Rocha, “Terminó la Cumbre Mundial del Clima y con compromisos débiles, acordó una transición de combustibles fósiles a energías limpias”, in *Infobae*, 13 December 2023, <https://www.infobae.com/america/medio-ambiente/2023/12/13/termino-la-cumbre-mundial-del-clima-y-con-compromisos-debiles-acordo-una-transicion-de-combustibles-fosiles-a-energias-limpias>.

²¹ Justin Birnbaum, “The World’s Highest-Paid Soccer Players 2023”, in *Forbes*, 13 October 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/justinbirnbaum/2023/10/13/the-worlds-highest-paid-soccer-players-2023>.

²² Thin Lei Win, “Keeping Up with the Koronivia”, in *Thin Ink*, 3 December 2022, <https://news.thin-ink.net/p/keeping-up-with-the-koronivia>.

There is also a general concern that ambitious reforms are being stymied by powerful interest groups that want to keep the status quo. Media reports have tracked how lobbyists from industrial agriculture companies and trade groups turned out in record numbers at COP28²³ – many coming as part of official country delegations that provided access to negotiation rooms to these actors, while farmers, whose livelihoods are on the line, do not have similar access.

The way forward

So, what now, when even the most optimistic observers admit that changes around the food-climate nexus are incremental and pessimists question whether we can afford to move so slowly when what we need is transformational change? And when this year’s COP also failed to address structural inequalities that underpin global food systems? Systemic change requires acting upon such inequalities, including corporate concentration that keeps key agricultural inputs and outputs in the hands of a few conglomerates, subsidies that prop up unsustainable farming practices, and a lack of fair income and climate finance for food producers who want to move away from fossil fuels and turn to eco-friendly farming methods but need financial and technical support urgently.

Besides, change must happen on a global scale and not limited to stable,

²³ Rachel Sherrington, Clare Carlile and Hazel Healy, “Big Meat and Dairy Lobbyists Turn Out in Record Numbers at Cop28”, in *The Guardian*, 9 December 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/pg6mp>.

peaceful nations. In fact, communities living in conflict in places like Haiti, South Sudan and Myanmar, are often struggling with the nexus challenges interfacing hunger, displacement, insecurity and natural disasters and need even more sustained help. In Myanmar, where this author was born and raised, a combination of armed conflict and vulnerability to natural disasters have left nearly one in four people with not enough to eat.²⁴

Still, it would be even more detrimental to humanity to throw our hands up and stop fighting. Those who want fairer, greener, and healthier food systems should capitalise on the momentum generated by COP28 to support countries that have signed on to the COP28 UAE Declaration, while also working within global forums such as G7, G20 and the UNFCCC to get food systems the prominence they deserve.

Time is ticking. Countries have only 14 months to revise their national climate plans ahead of COP30 and they need to address both mitigation and adaptation together. This means a shift in both production and consumption practices, according to some experts.²⁵

The arrival of food systems on the COP stage is long overdue but the key thing now is to turn rhetoric into concrete, inclusive action that takes into account the needs and vulnerabilities

of communities most affected by the food-climate nexus. The work must start now, to build alliances, to raise awareness, and to provide successful examples of mitigation, adaptation and transitions to more sustainable and more equitable systems. Countries, companies and leaders must also be held accountable so that pledges must be fulfilled and delivered with urgency and transparency.

20 December 2023

²⁴ OCHA, *Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024*, 18 December 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/node/4023878>.

²⁵ Author's online interview with Patty Fong, Program Director for Climate, Health & Well-Being at the Global Alliance for the Future of Food, 14 December 2023.

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- 23 | 68 Thin Lei Win, *Food Systems Take the Stage at COP28: But Will Actions Match Rhetoric?*
- 23 | 67 Aurelio Insisa, *Timing Is Everything: Italy Withdraws from the Belt and Road Initiative*
- 23 | 66 Max Münchmeyer and Pier Paolo Raimondi, *Between Security and Transition: Prospects for German-Italian Energy Cooperation*
- 23 | 65 Ghazi Ben Ahmed, *Critical Crossroads: Tunisia's Choice between a Comprehensive EU Partnership and Economic Collapse*
- 23 | 64 Leo Goretti, *The Olympics of Discontent: Paris 2024 and Russia's War against Ukraine*
- 23 | 63 Michaël Ayari and Riccardo Fabiani, *To Deal or Not to Deal: How to Support Tunisia out of Its Predicament*
- 23 | 62 Manuel Herrera, *Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Ambitions: Frozen Once Again?*
- 23 | 61 Rafael Ramírez, *The Lifting of Sanctions and the Oil Collapse of Venezuela*
- 23 | 60 Maria Luisa Fantappiè and Nathalie Tocci, *Europe is Stuck Over the Israel-Hamas War*
- 23 | 59 Lorenzo Colantoni, *Technologies to Protect Global Forests: The Case of Indonesia*