

Food systems at COP28



A Declaration signed by more than 150 countries in Dubai represents a milestone for integrating food systems into climate policies. Whether it will lead to concrete change remains to be seen.

The year 2024 looks daunting. Besides well-known structural issues holding back the much-needed transformation of food systems towards equity, resilience and sustainability, the past several months have seen the exacerbation of hunger associated with wars, the weaponization of food, prospects of centre-right governors rising to power and the aggravation of our climate crisis.

Yet, a milestone for the food systems agenda is worth noting: last November, at COP28 in Dubai, almost 160 countries signed the Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems, and Climate Action. For the first time, a COP document has recognized the interdependence among these elements and their importance for an appropriate response to climate change.

A year earlier, food and agriculture had appeared in the official programme of COP27 in Egypt, but still had very little prominence in the negotiations (*Nat. Food* 3, 969; 2022). Worse even, food systems were framed in a reductionist way, based on a logic of agriculture's carbon intensity reduction. On that occasion, the terms 'agroecology' and 'food systems' were removed from the final text.

The Declaration signed at COP28 still places greater emphasis on food production than other parts of the supply chain (processing, distribution, consumption and disposal) but represents an advance in that it considers multiple stakeholders' demands and adopts a more holistic view of food systems. Nutrition, school feeding programmes, decent work, capacity building, biodiversity conservation, and "the specific needs of women, children and youth, Indigenous Peoples, smallholders, family farmers, local communities and persons with disabilities" all got a mention.

Efforts are now needed to translate intentions into results. While many see the Declaration with scepticism given its non-binding nature and the absence of specific targets, having signatories publicly and collectively state their plan to integrate food into climate strategies might pave the way for bigger steps in the near future. It is also hoped that the Declaration will contribute to policy coherence, harness synergies among economic sectors and across development goals, and pool financial resources to implement change.

Equal attention should be paid to governments' domestic actions in support of harmonizing food and climate policies. At present, most climate mitigation and adaptation efforts are taken up by cities and states. Local solutions tend to be easier to implement and help reconnect people to the food system. Examples include the promotion of alternative farming models, shorter supply chains, reduction of food loss and waste, and public procurement programmes.

A final point of attention concerns corporate interests and how they may influence climate talks. The agrochemical, livestock and dairy sectors are economically powerful and have so far pushed for measures that preserve the status quo. These sectors have sent more lobbyists than ever to COP28. It comes as no surprise that the number of representatives from agribusiness companies at climate conferences will grow as food systems gain ground; however, mechanisms must be put in place in the next COPs to ensure equal representativeness of other stakeholder groups and transparency with regard to everyone's aims, motivations and strategies. By joining COP28 as part of country delegations, many of the lobbyists from private companies had privileged access to diplomatic negotiations.

Research on each of these three fronts – namely, assessing integrated food and climate policies at the national level, enabling local food-climate solutions, and analysing different stakeholders' views and the political economy of food – is crucial for a more objective understanding of what is at stake, especially when different interests are involved. In this issue of *Nature Food*, you will find an Article exploring stakeholder-driven scenarios towards climate-smart nutrition security in four African countries, an Analysis demonstrating developmental pathways associated with scaling up urban agriculture, and a systematic review of the definitions and narratives shaping the protein transition in high-income countries.

Enjoy it!

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