

Visions of food systems at COP27



Food was finally on the menu at COP27, but divergences on the meaning of sustainable agriculture and what food systems should look like in the future may have limited progress on negotiations.

World leaders, researchers, industry, and the civil society gathered in Sharm El-Sheik last November for the 27th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27). Although food systems are responsible for about a third of global anthropogenic emissions and are therefore key to the achievement of the Paris Agreement mitigation targets, food had not yet been part of previous editions of the conference.

Four pavilions and nearly 200 events on food systems transformation were hosted by international institutes, think-tanks, industry and others. Food was also present on the climate agenda of many countries: Europe, USA and other high-income nations focused on strategies to nudge more sustainable food purchase, food technology and climate-friendly diets; in most of the Global South, talks revolved around the persistence of hunger, measures to close the yield gap, and financing mechanisms to enhance farmers' resilience to climate change and supply chain disruptions. Agriculture-driven deforestation and food impacts on biodiversity were also prominent topics for Brazil, Congo, Indonesia and other forest nations. And this year, for the first time, a day of official

negotiations was dedicated to agriculture and adaptation.

Yet, how do we, as the food community, reflect on the advance? The final document produced in the Koronivia Dialogue – the main forum at COP27 to address agriculture on the side of the negotiations – had the words 'agroecology' and 'food systems' removed from the text. The sole emphasis was on the supply side of food, while demand-related issues, such as food loss and waste or unsustainable consumption patterns, were omitted. The focus on supply could enable a purely carbon-based vision of agriculture to prevail, which isn't in line with the holistic and integrated perspective needed for the transformation of food systems. Besides, old contradictions remain: Africa emits less than 4% of global greenhouse gas emissions, but will suffer the most with climate change and its impacts on food security; and finance doesn't get to smallholders, even though they are the majority of the farmers around the world and feed most of the world population.

At the basis of these contradictions is a lack of agreement on what sustainable agriculture means and what food systems should look like in the future. Different pavilions at COP27 promoted disparate visions of the importance of behavioural change and dietary shifts versus technological fixes, or the role of smallholders in feeding the world. The Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate (AIM4C), a US and UAE initiative that aims to raise US\$8 billion for what they call 'climate-smart agriculture', brought together many of the world's largest agribusinesses. While these actors must be part of a solution,

it should be noted that industrial agriculture – primarily extractive, fossil-fuel-dependent and monoculture-focused – is set to benefit the most from the investments announced in Sharm El-Sheik, directed to climate-smart agriculture and management intensification strategies to increase yields. Similarly, carbon markets and offsets might expand into the land and agriculture sector after COP27; unless safeguards are put in place, the primary focus on carbon might divert attention away from the root causes of agriculture's climate impacts.

Having food on the COP agenda gives visibility to the food-climate nexus, creates awareness, fosters integrated policies, and leverages funds to the countries that need them. It also helps advance the operationalization of concrete pathways to achieve more nutritious, resilient and sustainable food systems – including the identification of questions that remain to be answered by scientists and researchers, so that effective, well-targeted policies can be implemented. Several parallels exist between the climate and food crises, and the food community can certainly learn from COPs. But the vision of food systems reflected in the final document of COP27 raises serious questions about their inclusion in the climate agenda, which was so hard-pushed for and debated at the United Nations Food Systems Summit. Now that food has made it to the COP, work is needed to align the food and climate communities, so that further progress can be achieved.

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