



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

22nd May 2024

Contact: *Martin Simenrud, Communications Officer, Clim-Eat. martin@clim-eat.org*

***False optimism, empty promises and hijacked agendas –
Why the UN has failed to tackle climate change in agriculture and food
systems, and what needs to happen next***

(Wageningen, The Netherlands) – 22nd May 2024 - THE UNITED NATIONS HAS FAILED to bring about action on climate change in relation to agriculture and food systems – that’s according to a [just-published peer-reviewed article by Clim-Eat authors in Outlook on Agriculture](#). They argue that urgent reforms are needed to the UN’s “yearly carousel” of climate-related meetings and summits, calling for honest reflection on the failures, impact evaluations, and more accountability to make them more effective.

The authors take particular aim at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – the body that coordinates international negotiations on climate change, primarily through its annual Conference of Parties (COP) summits. They call out the persistent disconnect between COP-related rhetoric on food and agriculture and the lack of substantive action.

It comes as the UNFCCC prepares to host its mid-year climate conference in Bonn, Germany, a key milestone in the lead-up to November’s COP29 summit in Azerbaijan. Negotiations on agriculture will continue during these talks, although no major breakthrough is expected.

UNFCCC negotiations have included issues relating to food and agriculture since 2006, seeking agreement between nations on how to protect food production from the impacts of climate change while reducing the role of food in the production of greenhouse gas emissions. However, despite the ballooning participant numbers at the annual COP meetings where negotiations take place and the proliferation of statements, declarations, and

initiatives on agriculture and food systems in recent years, emissions from the agriculture sector have continued to rise. Concerns about the impact of climate change on food production itself have also grown.

“The UNFCCC is taking the public for fools,” said Dhanush Dinesh, lead author and founder of climate change “think-and-do-tank” Clim-Eat. “Time and again – when the spotlight is on them – the COPs make grand announcements about new initiatives or breakthroughs in negotiations. Then, nothing seems to happen until the following year, when they do it all again. This annual merry-go-round of false optimism and empty promises has to stop.”

Faking the initiative?

Based on a review of UNFCCC literature and their own experiences from attending COP summits over the years, the authors identify several areas of concern. Firstly, they question the impact of “special initiatives” launched by the COP host country or Presidency. Despite the fanfare, the authors claim these have achieved little, tending to have a short shelf life while resulting in a significant waste of funds and energy. Examples include:

- France’s “4 per 1000” initiative, launched at COP21, promoted carbon storage on farmland. In seven years, it has only reported the number of partners or countries engaged and nothing on how much carbon has actually been stored.
- Morocco’s flagship COP22 initiative on Adaptation in African Agriculture no longer mentions its ambitious target of raising USD 30 billion to support farmers on the continent—presumably because it hasn’t happened, say the authors.
- There was nothing speedy about COP27’s Food and Agriculture for Sustainable Transformation (FAST) initiative, which aimed to improve the quality, quantity, and access to climate finance for sustainable agriculture. A full year after its launch, its main achievement appears to have been hosting an inception meeting.
- The authors also draw attention to the disconnect between the ambitious wording of many special initiatives and the lack of comparable phraseology agreed upon in international negotiations at the very same summits. A case in point is last year’s “landmark” Declaration on Food and Agriculture at COP28 in Dubai: Signed by 159 countries, it called for action to adapt food systems to climate change, but formal negotiations failed to acknowledge the Declaration or reflect its priorities.

The authors acknowledge that the COP summits, as highly visible moments, play an important role in shaping national and international priorities, agendas and funding decisions relating to food and farming. But they note that the promised actions often fail to materialise. “Unless the sector shifts from narrative building to results (and finance) delivery, these narratives will remain empty promises,” they warn.

Furthermore, the authors point to the growing presence of special groups at COP summits, lobbying to protect their interests, pointing to the record numbers of representatives from meat and dairy companies – major GHG emitters – attending COPs.

The way forward

The authors propose a number of solutions, including an honest appraisal of the successes and failures of COP summits to date and the use of impact evaluations of the negotiation process and the special initiatives to establish their effectiveness. These should be based on real-world metrics like emissions reductions.

They also call for the UNFCCC to adopt a “watchdog-type function” tasked with exposing inaction by countries and others (NGOs, civil society organisations, and more). This would go hand in hand with a more streamlined roster of COP summits – perhaps on a multi-annual basis – and greater emphasis on so-called “inter-sessional” and working meetings, all of which should prioritise the sharing of results on climate action. Transparency about the costs of these meetings will also help establish whether they are worthwhile, and the UNFCCC itself needs to be protected from the changing priorities of COP host countries, private consultancies, and lobby groups.

Finally, the authors warn that the consensus-based nature of COP negotiations means food and agriculture are often used as bargaining chips for countries to achieve favourable outcomes in negotiations on other sectors, such as energy. This makes the COP process inherently unreliable for achieving action on food and agriculture. Instead, the international community should ensure that UN agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP), the International Fund For Agricultural Development (IFAD), together with the international agricultural research network CGIAR, are funded in accordance with their ability to demonstrate measurable results on tackling climate change.

“These are all deep-seated challenges,” continued Dinesh. But we urgently need to learn from those failures and create something better; something that will deliver results, actions, reduced emissions and more resilient farms and farmers.”

The article, [*Has process hijacked purpose? Outlook on food systems transformation in the global climate change processes*](#), by Dhanush Dinesh, Leanne Zeppenfeldt, Philip Thornton and Bruce Campbell, has just been published in *Outlook on Agriculture*.

*

Additional info:

Clim-Eat

[Clim-Eat](#) is a “think-and-do” tank that aims to accelerate a just, global transition to sustainable food systems. It acts as a bridge connecting scientists and decision-makers to support evidence-based policymaking in the areas of climate change and food.
