

Cultivating Change at COP28: The Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems and Climate Action

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The global agricultural industry, the second-largest contributing sector to greenhouse gas emissions, must change for the world to meet the [Paris Agreement](#) commitments. This was acknowledged by the 134 signatories to [the Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems, and Climate Action](#) on the second day of 28th meeting of the Conference of the Parties ([COP28](#)). The declaration is a call to action to address the impact of climate change on food systems. It also encourages parties to move away from emission-intensive practices towards sustainable farming and consumption practices.

Much like other COP28 declarations, this one faces criticism from climate experts for what is left unsaid. There are concerns that meat and dairy lobbyists are influencing the agriculture-climate narrative such that the negative effects of current farming practices are being minimized. [A record number of industry lobbyists](#) arrived at the conference ahead of the dedicated COP28 Food and Agriculture Day on 10 December, where the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) discussed what is needed to keep global temperature increases at or below 1.5°C pre-industrial levels.

Agriculture and Climate

According to the [World Bank](#), climate change and food insecurity are the two greatest contemporary development challenges. As the world population is set to increase to 9.7 billion by 2050, so too is the global demand for food expected to increase. Historically growing food demand has been addressed by expanding agricultural production, leading to an increase in emissions. The food system cannot remain as it is if the world is to keep to the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C limit and meet the rising demand for food.

Today, the global food system is the leading source of methane emissions and the second largest contributor to all greenhouse gas emissions. It is the leading cause of biodiversity

loss and deforestation. Food wastage contributes notably to climate change – if the world’s food waste were to be amalgamated and ranked for its emissions as a country, it would come in third behind China and the United States. There is therefore a need to change consumption habits as well as farming practices to reduce emissions.

The Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems and Climate Action

Signatories of the declaration formally recognise the impact climate change has on food systems and food security, especially with regard to vulnerable groups (including smallholder farmers, women, and youth). The declaration notes the transformative potential of agriculture in addressing climate change and acknowledges the urgent need for adaptation. Acknowledging the UN Food Systems Summit, the declaration stresses that achieving the long-term goals of the Paris Agreement necessitates integrating agriculture and food systems.

The objectives of the declaration include the promotion of climate adaptation, ensuring food security for vulnerable groups, maintaining decent work conditions, improving water management, and reducing the harmful impacts associated with food systems. Signatories pledge to scale up adaptation and resilience activities, to provide crucial financial and technical support, infrastructure, and innovative solutions.

The declaration includes commitments to integrate food systems into national policies and promote sustainability through various avenues such as income policies, greenhouse gas reduction, and support for resilient livelihoods. Particular emphasis is placed on inclusive and decent work, sustainable water and biodiversity management, and minimizing the harmful impacts of agriculture on the environment.

The declaration represents some promising developments in climate action: the inclusion of food emissions on the COP28 agenda, the acknowledgement of the need to support smallholder farmers, and the inclusion of vulnerable groups (women and youth) in discussions on food security and climate change. The recognition of these issues is an achievement, especially given that the role of the food system in climate change has been somewhat neglected at previous COPs. Thus far, 134 states have signed the call to action, accounting for over 5.7 billion of the world’s population, 500 million farmers, 70% of the global food system and an estimated 76% of the world’s food-related emissions.

The declaration is, however, not without challenges. The absence of measurable targets for sustainable consumption and the non-binding nature of commitments pose challenges to its effectiveness. [ActionAid](#) has called the declaration a ‘missed opportunity’, referring to the pledges as ‘generic’ and “inoffensive;” that they fail to tackle current practices that drive climate change. According to the sustainable farming alliance, [Sustain](#), developed countries – which are responsible for producing most waste - need to commit to reducing the impact they have on poorer nations via their harmful consumption habits which have led to deforestation and pollution, for the declaration to have an impact. The failure to address the phasing out of livestock production and consumption in particular has raised concerns.

Livestock Lobby

The livestock industry (including but not limited to the meat and dairy industry) is the number one generator of methane emissions, with responsibility for the reduction in biodiversity, and deforestation. Unsurprisingly then, the absence of specific mentions of livestock in the declaration raises concerns about the meat and dairy industry’s alleged influence on the COP28 agenda. In preparation for the dedicated Food and Agriculture day on the 10th of December, an [unprecedented number of lobbyists](#) for the meat and dairy industry arrived in Dubai. The meat industry, on the other hand, lobbied lobbying for efforts to push “[positive livestock content](#)”.

Discrepancies in estimates of livestock-related emissions, ranging from 11.2% to 28.1%, highlight the complexity of the issue. Allegedly, [pressure from the meat industry has led to the FAO downplaying the impact of livestock on the environment](#). In line with this, climate experts have expressed concern that the FAOs estimates of livestock’s impact have fallen over time. In 2006, it was found to make up 18% of all emissions contributing to climate change; in 2013, this number was revised to 14.5%. Currently, it is [asserted to be only 11.2%](#). The scientific community has produced different findings such that the impact is estimated to be notably greater, lying somewhere between [16.5% and 28.1%](#).

Experts assert the FAO underestimates methane emissions by excluding atmospheric data, particularly in countries with significant agricultural industries. The exclusion of this data within estimation models has allegedly [increased the risk of underestimation of the industry’s impact by up to 47%](#).

10 December: Agricultural Day

The focus of the day was on addressing key issues in food systems and water resilience. Smallholder and traditional farmers from around the world discussed sustainable approaches like agroecology and agroforestry. Countries aligned on technical guidance for food system transport plans and targets in climate-related strategies; and a partnership between the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment and the World Bank Treasury led to [the 'Financing the Future of Food \(F3\)' initiative](#). Philanthropic funders pledged \$389 million, and the UAE and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation committed \$200 million for innovation. [AIM4Climate](#) reported \$17 billion in investments since COP26. The COP28 [Action Agenda on Regenerative Landscapes](#) involved over 25 organizations with a \$2.2 billion investment to accelerate a transition covering 160 million hectares. Non-state actors signed the [Call to Action on Transforming Food Systems](#), committing to 10 priority actions by COP29. Leading philanthropies called for a tenfold increase in funding for regenerative and agroecological transitions.

The FAO introduced [a new roadmap](#) outlining the necessary steps to align global food production with climate goals – i.e. to prevent hunger while meeting Paris Agreement goals. The roadmap finally draws attention to the issue of livestock: it calls for the reduction of methane emissions from livestock by 25%. It also advocates for a reduction in food waste emissions in half by 2030. The roadmap also suggests promoting the cultivation of a more diverse range of crops compared to current practices, aligning with efforts to enhance biodiversity in food production systems.

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