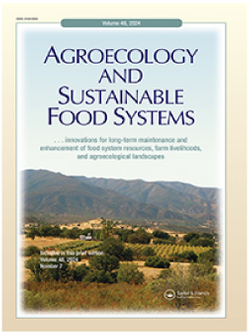

Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/wjsa21

Food Systems and climate crisis on the table at the COP 28 negotiations, but substantive change is off the menu thus far

Christopher M. Bacon & Stephen R Gliessman

To cite this article: Christopher M. Bacon & Stephen R Gliessman (2024) Food Systems and climate crisis on the table at the COP 28 negotiations, but substantive change is off the menu thus far, Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems, 48:7, 919-923, DOI: 10.1080/21683565.2024.2354235

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2024.2354235

Published online: 20 May 2024.

AGROECOLOGY AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS
2024, VOL. 48, NO. 7, 919–923
https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2024.2354235

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Food Systems and climate crisis on the table at the COP 28 negotiations, but substantive change is off the menu thus far

Christopher M. Bacon [a] and Stephen R Gliessman[b]

[a]Department of Environmental Studies and Sciences, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, USA;
[b]Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems, University of California Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, USA

KEYWORDS Global Environmental Agreements; COP 28; agroecology; food systems

The official delegates from 196 countries at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's (UNFCCC) 28th Conference of Parties (COP 28) negotiations that concluded in Dubai on December 13th, 2023, agreed – for the first time since these negotiations started in 1995 - to move away from fossil fuels. The final agreement (https://unfccc.int/documents/636608) recognizes that urgent, deep, and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, primarily from burning oil, gas, and coal, are needed to hold global warming to 1.5°C and keep a key goal of the Paris Agreement alive. The agreement also calls for "Transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner so as to achieve net zero by 2050, in keeping with the science,"

This language is incredibly late and weak when one considers that scientists, policy makers, advocates, and industry leaders have known that fossil fuel combustion has been driving anthropogenic climate change for more than 50 years (Revelle and Suess 1957). At least this statement partially responds to the accumulation of overwhelming scientific evidence, and pressure from environmental organizations. The fact that it took 35 years for national representatives and UN negotiators to include a clause about moving away from fossil fuels in a global climate agreement illustrates the uneven power dynamics among the scientists, activists, and selected government representatives pushing for strong language vs. corporations and other government officials negotiating for weaker language. Clearly, the agreement did not go far enough in addressing the profound climate injustices associated with historical asymmetries in emissions production relative to climate vulnerability today. This highlights the pressing need for more funding to address loss and damages, as well as stronger legal commitments and subnational action.

As agroecologists, we were pleased to see that, for the first-time, food systems had a significant profile in these climate negotiations, which we

CONTACT Christopher M. Bacon cbacon@scu.edu Department of Environmental Studies and Sciences, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, USA

followed closely, though we were unable to attend in person. COP 28 included a Food Systems Pavilion and at least one day of formal negotiations foregrounding the relationships between agriculture, food systems, and climate change. Prior to the summit, the IPCC's important Sixth Assessment report engaged agroecology for the first time (Bezner Kerr et al. 2022). A food and agriculture agreement (https://www.cop28.com/en/food-and-agriculture) was also signed by 159 countries before the end of the summit with commitments to slightly more ambitious goals that were still agreeable to a wide diversity of signatories. However, food justice concerns and food systems emissions fell out of the important concluding agreement, despite the fact that global agriculture and food systems account for about a third of all CHG emissions.

Non-state actors' call to action

During the climate meetings a mix of over 200 foundations, corporations, universities, and other non-state actors signed a non-binding call to action for the transformation of food systems by 2030. Introductory language in this call to action recognizes that food is a fundamental human right, the way it "connects people to their families, communities, cultures, and the natural world," and the more than 4 billion food systems workers both on and off the farm worldwide. Specific actions within this statement include:

- "Support frontline food systems actors to adapt and build resilience to climate risks, and other shocks and stresses;
- Align food systems with the 1.5°C goal [Paris Agreements goal], reducing absolute Green House Gas (GHC) emissions from food systems . . . ;
- Address rising hunger, and . . . ending hunger and malnutrition in all its forms.;
- Change food environments to improve availability, accessibility, and affordability in support of healthy, nutritious, sustainable, and locally appropriate diets, . . .
- Support a transition to and scaling up of sustainable approaches to food production that deliver positive outcomes for people, nature, and climate (including agroecology, organic, regenerative and nature-positive approaches . . . ."

This voluntary statement also includes calls for more transparency in emissions reporting, and consultative food systems governance.

Who was absent from the table and what was left off the menu?

Although Via Campesina participated in COP 26 two years earlier, this social movement representing millions of organized smallholders, rural workers,

indigenous peoples, youth and women boycotted COP 28. Lobbyists from fossil fuel industries and corporate agriculture attended COP 28 in record numbers, highlighting the growing importance of the COP negotiations and concern for the growing volume of voices calling for the reduction in agriculture's fossil fuel dependence. As usual many creative, engaged and committed civil society organizations, indigenous peoples, scientists, faith-based representatives, youth leaders and others participated primarily at side events but had limited influence on the content of the final agreements.

Although some language within the UN's 2030 food systems transformation agenda – such as the recognition of a human right to food, valuing of Indigenous and local knowledge systems, and calls for transformative change – can serve as leverage points for practitioners and engaged researchers, other items remained off the agenda. For example, neither the UN food systems agreement nor the non-state actors call to action mentions food sovereignty or decolonization. Agroecology is briefly mentioned in the call to action, but it risks being lumped together with other weaker ill-defined approaches, like nature-positive farming. If defined according to the accepted academic and social movement definitions, agroecology's inclusion could serve as a wedge for change, as it offers principles and a participatory approach that addresses power relations and guides deeper food system change. However, other participants worked to subvert the definition of agroecology, stripping its dialogic linkages to social movements, participatory integration of diverse knowledge systems and farming practices in ways that build food sovereignty as a strategy to assure the human right to food, reduce emissions, increase resilience, and ultimately inform a deeper food systems transformation.

What's next? Is it time to start organizing for COP 30 in Brazil?[1]

While the COP 28 agreements represent an important and much needed effort focused on global cooperation and an important step beginning to address long ignored relationships connecting climate change, fossil fuels use, and food systems, too many concerns were left out of the largely voluntary agreements. The lack of a substantive food system agreement will come as no surprise to close observers of the UN's 2021 Food Systems Summit (FSS) and the 2030 Agenda. In a post FSS reflection, Anderson et al. (2022), concluded that, "The Food Systems Summit process was deeply flawed, resulting in confusion and power inequities, yet it stimulated coalition-building and reflection on how and why to participate in global food governance." This implies that the movement to include food and farming systems in future COP deliberations is finally taking root.

[1]In an effort to conclude with a degree of hope for future UN Climate Negotiations, we have chosen to skip an analysis of COP 29 planned for November 2024 in Azerbaijan, which apparently has failed to name a single woman to their 28-member preparation team and focus on possibilities at COP 30 in Brazil.

The COP 28 outcomes and language in the text reflect global power imbalances among states, corporations, as well as different groups of scientists, advocates, faith-based organizations, and social movements. Given these outcomes, here are some possible next steps for those interested in an agroecology-inspired food systems transformation:

- First and foremost, agroecologists must continue doing the work of building food sovereignty at the local and regional scales needed for addressing intersecting crises.
- Second, farm and civil society-led community-based efforts must continue to work to redesign regional food systems through collectives, cooperatives and alternative networks reaching across production to distribution, so as to share innovations, strategies, and support for one another, while building coalitions for change (Gliessman 2019).
- Third, as local to regional coalitions for food sovereignty build political, economic and ecological influence, they will also need to engage funders and governments to help move the money and policies that open possibilities for more systemic change.

As participants in this broader change process, we offer this commentary not as a manifesto or roadmap, but as a pathway for each of us as individuals to use as we pursue our own personal transformations as part of collaborations for systemic change. Globally, everyone committed to deeper food system changes should consider sustaininga constructive yet critical engagement with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and advocating for "food system transformations grounded in agroecology principles and moving toward food sovereignty, as affirmed by the Nyéléni Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology and the CFS High Level Panel of Experts" (Montenegro de Wit et al. 2021). If we continue promoting, practicing and demonstrating agroecology on farms, in communities, and with regional and cross-network allies, and Brazil lives up to its potential as a social movement-friendly host, COP 30 in 2026 could have the transformative menu needed for real change.

Acknowledgments

Christopher M. Bacon is grateful for financial support from the National Science Foundation and Santa Clara University's Office of the Provost and Environmental Justice and Common Good Initiative. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation or other funders.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the National Science Foundation, United States [BCS 2117976].

ORCID

Christopher M. Bacon http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2534-6900

References

Anderson, M., L. Hoey, P. Hurst, M. Miller, and M. Montenegro De Wit. 2022. Debrief on the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS). *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 11 (2):13–17. doi:10.5304/jafscd.2022.112.008

Bezner Kerr, R., T. Hasegawa, R. Lasco, I. Bhatt, D. Deryng, A. Farrell, H. Gurney-Smith, H. Ju, S. Lluch-Cota, F. Meza, et al. 2022. Food, fibre, and other ecosystem products. In *Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. contribution of working group II to the sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on climate change*, ed. H.-O. Pörtner, D. C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E. S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, and B. Rama, 713–906. Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781009325844.007

Gliessman, S. 2019. Making the transition away from industrial agriculture: Using agroecology to promote food systems transformation. *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* 43 (2):121–22. doi:10.1080/21683565.2018.1529358

Montenegro de Wit, M., M. Canfield, A. Iles, M. Anderson, N. McKeon, S. Guttal, B. Gemmill-Herren, J. Duncan, J. D. van der Ploeg, and S. Prato. 2021. Editorial: Resetting power in global food governance: The UN food Systems summit. *Development* 64 (3–4):153–61. doi:10.1057/s41301-021-00316-x

Revelle, R., and H. E. Suess. 1957. Carbon dioxide exchange between atmosphere and Ocean and the Question of an Increase of Atmospheric CO2 during the past Decades. *Tellus* 9 (1):18–27. doi:10.3402/tellusa.v9i1.9075