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Agrarianizing climate accords & discord: food, agriculture & agrarian movements at UNFCCC Conference of the Parties

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ABSTRACT

How do agrarian justice movements factor into the UNFCCC annual global climate Conference of the Parties (COP)? How have they appeared and erupted, been excluded, appropriated, and barely allowed – over the years, and, in particular, at the 2022 COP27 and 2023 COP28? This paper asks and begins to answer these overlooked questions. In the heads-of-state negotiations, transnational agrifood, land, and labour issues do not take centre stage explicitly, but retain their power as irrefutable crises; agri-food topics finally commanded prominence as crux to climate governance – yet ripe for corporate capture . In the accords themselves, agrarian mobilizations again serve as the backdrop, marginalized via scalar and developmental discourses, epistemic devaluation, and political economies of agro-corporate dominance. In the actual conference, land-based, campesina/peasant/farmworker coalitions participate through the channels of Approved NGO Observer Organizations. Indigenous nations, at the heart of agrarian movements garner limited recognition of their outsized efficacy at agro/biodiversity stewardship and thus climate justice and survival. Yet, from these contested peripheries, agrarian struggles nevertheless manage to command attention, forge transnational coalitions, and, against great odds, set key terms for the COP talks themselves. Drawing on collaborative event ethnography and policy analysis, this paper traces the contours of this improbable – yet, from the long durée vantage: foreseeable – dynamic of agrarian coalition power expanding from the marginalized majority, at COP27, COP28, and beyond.

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Introduction: the 'First food COP'

At Conference of the Parties 27 at the Red Sea, over 35,000 people converged from across the world to a resort town in an ancient Bedouin village at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. A vast complex of conference rooms and buildings erected the week before greeted us, complete with air conditioning (on high), voluminous electricity, and strong Wi-Fi. The first week tackled logistical issues of scant, overpriced food and sewage leaks. By the second week, the Nestle café, in single-use paper cups, flowed freely. For a long wait in line, one could find half-priced overpriced snacks. Some corridors had water bottle-filling stations; others had mini-fridges of free Coca-Cola – a contentious corporate sponsor of the Conference. In the central courtyard near the main entrance stood a Hard Rock Café burger stand – a parody or prank, surely?

The layout was enormous and labyrinthine. Why weren't the dozen conference buildings clearly labelled, named, or distinguished from each other? As an academic, I felt trained for this, with years of experience navigating large academic conferences in generic hotel complexes. The hallway hustle, programmes, and agendas, the scheduling for maximum learning, meeting, and networking, the exchange of contacts, the computer lab lines to recharge devices, the habitual gesture towards one's lanyard when introducing oneself and one's affiliation. But is this the capacity building needed to decrease emissions? Are these the skills of climate resilience?

The sheer physical distance from Plenary 1 to Session 7a, a jaunt in dress shoes through the hot desert sun, then the chilled AC interiors, back out to Arabian sun, on to more makeshift buildings. The space itself and the food therein, so decontextualized from its climate, so ableist in its presumptions. So few wheelchairs to aid the differently abled, the pregnant, the elderly among us. Meals were sold and coffee served as fuel to keep negotiations running. Trash cans filled. Is this what to teach the next generation, as the climate crisis stakes get even sky-higher?[1]

The 2022 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) 27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt drew enthusiasm – and us, the authors, to it – as 'the First Food COP'. It proudly established the first official Food and Agriculture Pavilion, and a wide array of organizations participated valiantly to get 'food on the table' of climate conversations: a surprisingly uphill endeavour. Food and agriculture have remained sidelined in global climate conversations to date, despite ample data that the food system emits a full third of anthropogenic greenhouse gasses (Crippa et al., 2021). The COPs' formal accords and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) have avoided agrifood issues, at least head-on (WWF et al., 2020). For

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decades, few countries even mentioned food and agriculture in their NDCs.[2] And when they did, UNFCCC Parties (i.e. countries) often focused narrowly on production aspects of the food system, rather than looking systematically to include aspects of transportation, packaging, waste and supply chains – much less adaptations or equity (Global Alliance, 2022). The heads-of-state negotiations also have had surprisingly little to say about agricultural, land tenure, and food systems – either as emitters (or potential sinks) of greenhouse gasses, or as the front line of climate disasters' many impacts. Most troubling, the final COP27 Decision on greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions mitigation failed to even mention agrifood systems, or anything more than the notoriously vague and paltry COP26 Decision to merely 'accelerate efforts towards the phase down of unabated coal power and phase-out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies'.

Nevertheless, over the years, the momentum for a more proactive mitigation of agrifood sector emissions and a more integrative intervention in adaptation and climate justice has grown. A broad array of stakeholders, from activists to agribusinesses, large-scale NGOs to grassroots peasant organizations, and scholars across and beyond the disciplines have all been clamouring to put, if not centre, food at the global climate negotiations table. The First Food COP emerged from that persistence, featuring three (or four by some counts) food and agriculture pavilions and drawing thousands of participants from agri-food contexts or sectors.

The existence of these pavilions in itself was striking because there were no formalized food system pavilions within the Blue Zone[3] at the prior COP26, in Glasgow. Nourish Scotland and several other partners hosted food and agriculture-focused events just outside the official conference site. Other food events were housed at pavilions such as WWF's 'Panda-Hub' pavilion and others. To have numerous food-focused official pavilions at COP27 represented a huge shift in the literal COP landscape, which earned it the First Food COP title by many (FAO, 2022; Gupta, 2022).

However, under the collective goal and momentum of centreing food, there were fundamental disagreements on how exactly that table should be set – and who should even set it. Should the focus go to globalized trade or more localized food systems? Should policy draw down agriculture's emissions footprint through industrial intensification or agroecological practices that mimic ecosystems? Whose viewpoints, rights, traditions, and visions for the future matter in making these vital decisions? A show of these pressing questions, echoing decades-long disagreements, came to a head in the contestations over the 2021 United Nations Food System Summit (UNFSS).[4] However, that summit catalyzed a large-scale boycott by a multitude of NGOs, farmers and peasant organizations, and academics from around the world who critiqued the dominance of corporate actors (Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSM), 2021). Leading this UNFSS counter-mobilization were agrarian justice organizations and coalitions—a surprising feat since.

agrarian realms remain marginalized via scalar and developmentalist discourses, epistemic devaluation of 'peasantry', and political economies of agro-corporate dominance. Often overlapping with Indigenous, African Diaspora, migrant, and 'peasant' (campesina/ awkwardly translated into English) communities and movements, agrarian realms also endure systemic racism, classism, and biases against rural or manual labour domains. For decades in the UNFCCC conference proceedings, agrarian mobilizations – and their central frameworks of agroecology, food sovereignty, land defence, water protection, and farm justice – have remain sidelined, as they have in most international governance spaces, from the World Trade Organization to the World Intellectual Property Organization and beyond.

Nevertheless, the scale, diversity, and transnational organizational capacity of these movements grow yearly. At the heart of the growing import and impact of agrifood systems are agrarian movements – mobilizations that arise from and strive to defend agrarian practices rooted in land-based life, food ways, livelihoods, and worldviews. In the last few decades, against great odds, they have even grown to become formidable transnational coalitions. Critical agrarian studies scholars have called attention to the sprawling translocal agrarian equity coalition-building underway (Borras, 2023; Edelman & Borras, 2016; Taşdemir Yaşın, 2022), and the ways these grassroots movements have mobilized to impact international forums (Borras & Franco, 2018) like the UNFCCC itself (Claeys & Delgado, 2017) where they have mobilized to build capacity, and increasingly wielded subtle and surprising, if largely unrecognized, influence. Despite being (or perhaps because they are) under-resourced, dispossessed, and even criminalized from these institutional peripheries, agrarian movements manage to command attention, forge transnational coalitions, and set key terms for the COP talks themselves, as this paper explores.

While the spotlight on food systems and its many disagreements are new to UNFCCC's COP, the decades-long contestations at the intersection of agri-food and climate policies offer a window to understand how broader governance could progress; in short, climate policy scholars need to know more about agrarian movements. Accordingly, in this paper, we examine how agrarian movements participate in, make use of, and impact the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its annual Conference of the Parties. How are their objectives enacted in this space? How are different food system futures performed at the climate COP, and how are their agendas taken up or not? How have agrarian justice mobilizations appeared and erupted, been excluded, appropriated, and barely allowed – over the years at UNFCCC meetings, and particularly in most recent COPs? And, finally, is struggling for recognition of their issues in such a huge, corporate-dominated event even worth it? We argue that food and agricultural realms, though historically minimized, now course through the heart of climate politics. This paper traces the contours of this improbable – yet, from the long durée vantage: foreseeable – dynamic of agrarian coalition power unfolding from the marginalized majority, at COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, COP28 in Dubai, and beyond. We contend that these questions have become pressing not just for those of us studying agrifood systems, policies, and movements, but for anyone studying climate change, climate governance, or climate justice.

Methodologically, the paper works alongside the other articles in this *Climate & Development* special feature to

form a collaborative event ethnography of COP27 [site special issue intro essay]. Collaborative event ethnography traces and attends to the lived experience of this vast meeting, both virtually and in person. Governance takes place in formal policies and litigation and pledges, but also in the materialities of negotiation and its exclusions. This methodology pays close attention to the setting of official conferences, and whose languages, knowledge, body, and modes of knowing and being are centred or dismissed, referenced, or refuted. Campbell et al. (2014) noted how the performative aspect of COP global meetings has become 'spectacles, stages on which different actors perform their policy preferences in front of an audience' (p. 6). As such, they need to be analysed as social devices subject to orchestration through which institutional and organizational ends can be achieved, legitimized, and contested (p. 7).

To this end, we (the authors) bring multidisciplinary perspectives to this subject and to this method – from geography to environmental humanities, visual art to social, political, and environmental sciences. We draw upon and analyse UNFCCC climate policy analysis, agrarian social movement analysis, and six key informant interviews[5] with experts of UNFCCC and agrarian movements to supplement and triangulate our participatory observation findings. We aim to understand the underlying norms that govern the UN climate negotiations, and map which spatialities and temporalities are privileged and to what effect. Two of us participated in person, stretching the sought-after 'Observer' status to reflexive, collective event- and auto-ethnographic modes. The third author tracked the event virtually, with a digital deep dive into the 'remote' version of COP27 and COP28, to flesh out how this exclusive event aimed – but often failed – to involve the masses who could not afford a trip to the Red Sea or Persian Gulf, or could not obtain an elusive entrance badge or visas. We weave in our ethnographic interludes, italicized.

Finally, we preface that COPs have become such huge and multi-faceted events, that tracking everything that unfolds there becomes impossible. Indeed, multiple COPs take place on the ground simultaneously, and each participant gets a different window into the debates, discourse, and worlds unfolding at these conferences. Our blended perspectives, therefore, offer one vantage point from which to understand these complex meetings.

Food systems: A contested landscape on view at COP27

Unpacking the agrifood sector's involvement in and influence on the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties sheds light on agrarian movements' subtle but telling impacts. The actual Conference of the Parties allows civil society to participate only through the channel of Approved Observer Organizations. Most Approved Observer Organizations are large non-governmental organizations designed for such international forum participation; some are sector-specific, like 'Farmers' and 'Academics'. More recently, but increasingly, grassroots coalitions of campesinos, peasant farmers, farmworkers, and agrarian communities have also sought and gained the elusive formal 'Approval to Observe'. Nevertheless significant power asymmetries persist in terms of what solutions even merit consideration , due to vested interests (Stoddard et al., 2021), hegemonic norms, and path dependency.

At COP 27, several farmers attended, from varying perspectives. The World Farmers Organization (WFO) had a delegation of over 100 farmers (WFO-OMA, 2022). La Vía Campesina (LVC), an international alliance of peasant organizations that support small-scale farming and food sovereignty (Desmarais, 2002), had 20 representatives (UNFCCC Secretariat, 2022). As one LVC delegate commented, 'we are here to counter what the WFO farmers are saying'. More research is needed to better understand how the UNFCCC grants badges to delegates under the category of 'Farmer'. Indigenous Nations have struggled, effectively, for more recognition of and respect for their outsized efficacy at biodiversity and agrobiodiversity stewardship and climate resilience and mitigation yet still, they do not have access to full Party status. The COP21 Paris Agreement finally established the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform in 2015, which has since become a crucial forum and hub for land defenders, water protectors, and Indigenous-led agrarian justice movements worldwide (UNFCCC, 2021). In 2017, the Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture & Food (KJWA) Group began and has since taken important, though vague, directions, as the paper discusses in later sections.

Agrifood systems remain a highly contested space, with divisions running deep. These divisions were mapped onto the physical landscape of the COP27, which hosted three (or four by some counts) food and agriculture pavilions with widely divergent perspectives and little overlap between speakers and approaches to food system transformation. Closest to the main entrance of the COP27 was the 'Food Systems Pavilion', coordinated by the new organization Clim-Eat. This pavilion hosted various panelists who had been key organizers at the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit. Among them was Agnes Kalibata, who serves as president of the controversial Alliance for a New Green Revolution for Africa (Holt-Giménez, 2008; Belay & Mugambe, 2021), and was the Special Envoy in charge of the UNFSS. The pavilion also hosted representatives from large global NGOs such as the Environmental Defence Fund (EDF), The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the Food and Land Use Coalition (FOLU), and transnational companies such as Yara fertilizer and Infarm (a high-tech vertical farming company). Many COP participants noted that Yara's early participation in this pavilion had set the agenda, discouraging the participation of those who were less supportive of the high-input conventional agricultural practices that the fertilizer company represented.

While this was the first-ever 'Food Systems Pavilion at COP', in the next building over was the first 'Food and Agriculture Pavilion' hosted by the Rockefeller Foundation, FAO, and the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research. This pavilion announced the intention of 'putting agrifood systems at the heart of the COP27 agenda'. Alongside panels on Farmers as soil carbon stewards and on widening the mandate of Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture to food systems, the Food & Agriculture Pavilion also included many panels on public-private partnerships. These featured banks, investors, and corporations already financing climate-based agrifood interventions. Chief among the COP27 global

intervention announcements was the recently launched, extremely well-funded AIM4Climate initiative, led by the United States and the United Arab Emirates. While the initiative remains open to all stakeholders – much like the UNFSS, AIM4Climate orients towards industrial agri-bio-technological-products and market-based solutinos. Calling for—and funding—[add quote marks] new technologies, products, and approaches...to mitigate and adapt to climate change [end quote], it conspicuously sidesteps calls to regulate GHG from confined animal feeding operations – an infamous sourse of methane – or from nitrogen fertilizers – an egregious source of nitrous oxide and eutrophication (Clément, 2022; Lakhani, 2022).

Furthest from the main entrance was the Food4Climate pavilion where a mix of NGOs was promoting a reduction in animal agriculture coupled with a focus on farmers' rights, food sovereignty, and challenging corporate narratives of innovation.[6] In addition to the more formal setting of the pavilions, closet-sized wooden booths housed gathering spaces for grassroots organizations such as the vast transnational agrarian justice peasant organization La Vía Campesina, where our authors received distributed copies of publications like 'Hoodwinked in the Hothouse' and 'Resist False Solutions to Climate Change'. The disparity in the size and locations of the spaces was telling, driven by notoriously expensive price tags for the pavilions – with the food systems pavilions priced between USD $30,000-$60,000 per partner organization. These high financial barriers undermine low-resource frontline organizations' ability to sign up as formal partners to an official pavilion. This spatial imbalance further skewed the formal Blue Zone agendas, further foreclosing which topics merited formal discussion. At COP27, this raised an important structural issue with merely a few key exceptions, such as when Million Bellay, General Coordinator for the African Food Sovereignty Alliance (AFSA), spoke at one Food Systems Pavilion event. And yet, despite the many structural challenges —which as we outline later—agrarian movement messages—wtih theirkey terms of agroecology and food sovereignty—persisted and did make their way into prominent pavilions, where they gathered robust audience and attention.

However, despite the spotlight on food systems—there was little cross-pollination between the pavilions. Describing the proliferating contradictory approaches and ideologies at the event, a representative from a food systems foundation remarked: 'Last year there was too little food at COP, now there is too much'. The divergent pavilions and booths remained separated spatially, socially, finanially, and philosophically, except for in key instances of intervention, such as when Belay, General Coordinator of the African Food Sovereginty Alliance sppoke at one Food Systems Pavilion event. The broader contested landscape of agrifood politics parallels climate policy contentions, with grassroots mobilizations challenging corporate dominance and profiteering – and governments long leaning into the latter. Though it remains hard to trace agrarian movements' explicit influences on formal and often contested international processes such as the UNFSS (Anderson et al., 2022; Brock, 2023; Montenegro de Wit et al., 2021), the inclusion of Agroecology as a track in the UNFSS and in the most recent IPCC assessment report evidence their influence. These shifts typically emerge as a result of scholars, activists, and others who have worked within, in parallel, or learned from these influential social movements (Borras & Franco, 2023). Yet, we argue that the agrifood political spectrum also helps clarify the convoluted dynamics underway in climate governance and even its stubborn path dependencies (Borras et al., 2022). For instance, it is worth tracing how food systems movements: expand in breadth and scope; garner grassroots support via intersectional coalitions; work in, though, around, against, and beyond nation states; risk co-optation from private-industry giants; and more.

The UNFSS – food securitization & food sovereignty

The food and agriculture 'sector' has always encompassed a multi-faceted spectrum of public agencies, ministries, private sector firms, civil society, researchers, extensionists, philanthropies, farmers, food and farmworkers, and grassroots agrarian movements – and this diversity has only grown larger, more complex, more funded, and more divergent. The lines of tension underlying this international landscape of agrifood movements and industries, policy- and grant-making were made visible during the 2021 United Nations Food System Summit (UNFSS). The UNFSS was a global endeavour that epitomized both the dominant paradigms in the agrifood sector and the remarkable transnational counter-mobilization. Low-resourced farmers, fishers, pastoralists, peasants, and farmworkers from rural places around the globe participated in virtual networks and presentations to contest and boycott the presumptions and blind spots of the UN event. The counter-mobilization served as a microcosm of the diverse and divergent gamut of power and politics and paradigms around agrifood, from hi-tech philanthro-agro-capitalism to agrarian food sovereignty and agroecology coalitions the world over (CSIPM, 2021; Food Systems for People, 2021; La Vía Campesina, 2021).

The disproportionate and exacerbated impacts of the pandemic on food security elevated expectations for the UNFSS to address these concerns. The UNFSS was rife with controversy from the start. Numerous civil society organizations, farmers, and policy groups opposed the Summit for engaging too heavily with corporate actors in the very design of the Summit. This approach, they argued, led to business-as-usual tech-fix solutions and precluded transformative approaches focused on food sovereignty and agroecology. Moreover, it undermined multilateral processes among nation states in favour of a 'multistakeholderism' where corporations and other special interests gained inordinate influence over international food systems governance (Canfield, Anderson, & McMichael, 2021; Clément, 2022; Montenegro de Wit et al., 2021). Additionally, the Summit ignored key literature coming out from UN Special Rapporteurs and through the UN World Committee on Food Security and maintained stubbornly neoliberal and productivist paradigms to define the problems and solutions of agri-food systems (CFS, 2020; De Schutter, 2010; MacInnis et al., 2022). This logic prioritizes production- and trade-driven interventions, despite their documented limitations in achieving food security goals

(Chaplin-Kramer et al., 2023; Fakhri, 2021; Wittman, 2015). Furthermore, it addresses neither economic inequality, the main driver of hunger, nor the structural path dependencies of high-input, commodity-based, export-oriented food systems in the formal chamber (Clapp, 2023; Clapp & Moseley, 2020; IPES-Food, 2022).

Though it likely has its roots in earlier Mexican government programmes (Edelman, 2014) food sovereignty remains strongly associated with La Vía Campesina (LVC), and the 2007 Nyéléni Declaration of Food Sovereignty (Nyéléni, 2007); it arose and continues to gain traction and power as a counter-discourse and countermovement to the paradigm of food security. The Nyéléni declaration announced that food sovereignty was, ' … the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity' (Nyeleni 2007). While food sovereignty originated as an oppositional force to globalized trade dominated by transnational corporations and neoliberal international institutions (such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund) (Weis, 2008, Claeys, 2015), it grew to more resolutely oppose the framing of 'food security' (Hopma & Woods, 2014), which favours intensification, increased production, globalized trade, and supports the idea that food is, and should be, another commodity subject to dominant trade regime. Conversely, food sovereignty addresses structural issues such as land rights, 'the right to have rights' (Patel, 2009), gender equity, and agroecology (Wittman, 2009, Rosset & Martinez-Torres, 2012).

More recently, agrifood scholars are building upon this long-standing critique of such food securitization, by focusing on the military undertones of securitizing hunger crises and thus of anti-hunger interventions. This work demonstrates the connections between food and carceral systems (Reese & Sbicca, 2022). All the while, food sovereignty mobilizations proliferate around the world, as a set of explicit contestations to a reductive paradigm of food security and the securitization of food systems at large. At the heart of the contested agrifood political landscape lies a tension around the securitization of malnourishment. The driving force – and threat – of mass hunger has toppled and consolidated power for millennia, and the last century has been no exception. With its Cold War geopolitical origins, the discourse and paradigm of 'food security' has dominated international organizations and governance ever since (Dalby, 1992). What is food secure, and for and by whom, remain tangled questions across the agrifood sector, with far-reaching geopolitical ramifications, which unfolded in the policed experience of COP27, COP28, and in their official output so subservient to geopolitics and authoritarianism. These long-simmering tensions erupted into global outcry in late 2023, with the Israeli deployment of a total siege on Gaza that deliberately blocked access to food, fresh water, or medical supplies. By COP28, Israeli bombardment had already killed tens of thousands of Palestinians and famine loomed: COP participants rallied in solidarity for Palestine, directly linking climate justice to liberation from military occupation, apartheid, and genocide. Executive Directors of War on Want and Climate Action Network International decried what they called COP repression of Palestine solidarity, from "de-badging" to policing of speech (Hearst, 2023). They, along with other groups, organized a rally at COP28 Blue Zone, waving keffiyehs and watermelon symbol, while reading aloud the names of those killed by Isreali forces. Organizers reported that COP officials banned the words: apartheid, settler colonialism, and even ceasefire (Dupraz-Dobias, 2023).

Climate Smart agriculture and its discontents

At the Conference of the Parties 27 and 28, explicit policing mirrored more implicit surveillance apparatuses undergirding the myriad agritech innovations and investment schemes. 'Climate-Smart' Agricultural (CSA) development interventions rely upon mass data collection, begging questions of intellectual property, access to big data, and data sovereignty. Well-funded corporate efforts to collect and analyse on-farm data expect farmers to give up this data freely and then be governed by it to meet various emissions and other goals dictated by corporate interests (Bronson, 2022). Civil society, following frontline concerns, critiques carbon offsetting for its massive data collection as well as its structural enabling of unchecked corporate carbon emissions (FOE, 2023). Agrifood scholars track how such data disciplines farmers and farmland (Duncan et al., 2022; Stock & Gardezi, 2021) and become fetishized in and of itself (Montenegro & Canfield, 2023, august 13).

What some tout as exciting pathways forward, others see as 'false solutions'. Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) is one such example. Agrarian movements criticize CSA for framing, justifying, and resourcing 'business as usual' approaches (Newell & Taylor, 2018). They argue that CSA enables greenwashing where companies can instrumentalize their framing, boosted with the promise of reduced emissions, to continue unsustainable and non-transformational practices. For example, synthetic input companies such as Yara, Monsanto and Syngenta use CSA framing to brand their products (fertilizers, Genetically Modified crops, pesticides, etc.) as 'smart solutions'. These companies contend their solutions increase production and reduce emissions through 'synergistic mechanisms' (Karlsson et al., 2018, p. 162). However, these technological fixes do not adequately address the input-intensive agricultural methods they promote, which remain significant contributors to pollution, emission, soil and water degradation, biodiversity loss, and socio-economic agrarian distress (IDS and IPES-Food, 2022; IPES-Food, 2022; Jain, 2023).

The myopic focus on CSA garners inordinate resources, investments, policy supports, and governmental subsidies, to the detriment of alternatives, regenerative agriculture, agroecology, and agro-biodiversity, which remain under-invested and undermined (Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development and IPES-Food, 2020; Fairbairn, 2015). Robust agrarian movement resistance has critiqued CSA for sidestepping and thus enabling injustices – from gender to racial inequities to land grabs and labour exploitation (Climate Smart Agriculture Concerns – Signatories, 2014; Newell & Taylor, 2018). Many see the framing of 'regenerative' agriculture in a similar light, as an approach evading considerations of equity and justice, land tenure and political economy (IDS and IPES-Food,

2022). New CSA markets proliferate to tackle concerns around agrifood system emissions, but also to profit from them; who sets the terms and ensures accountability? What problems are being solved – and for whom? Newell and Taylor (2018) mapped the regime complex and political economy of CSA and found fertilizer companies to be over-represented and influential, echoing similar findings from other analyses. Furthermore, La Vía Campesina (2014) lambastes CSA as part of a larger 'green' structural adjustment regime furthering food insecurity, corporate accumulation of power, commodification of nature, and the dispossession of land-based people (Karlsson et al., 2018, p. 156). Importantly, a range of alternatives to high-tech CSA unfold and proliferate around the world outside La Vía Campesina, such as System of Rice Intensification, Zero Budget Natural Farming, permaculture, and others (in myriad other languages of course).

Agriculture in formal UNFCCC Space

Within the larger realm of climate negotiations and diplomacy, agriculture's massive greenhouse gas emissions have come into view with damning data. The UNFCCC instigated an official forum to focus research and analysis on climate-agrifood systems at COP17 in Durban in 2011, on the request of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) in their 'Views on Issues Relating to Agriculture'. In May 2012, SBSTA posted their formal compilation of twenty submissions from parties, five submissions from international organizations, 24 submissions from 22 non-governmental organizations, and overall, many testimonials from farmers and farmer organizations, across the global north and south. In 2017, at COP23 in Bonn, the UNFCCC launched the Koronivia Joint Working Group on Agriculture (KJWA) to address food and agriculture, to build on the preliminary foundation work of the SBSTA, as well as the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI). KJWA meets in person and presents their findings at the COP meetings, even as they also advance work remotely in workshops and inter-sessional expert meetings. The UNFCCC charged KJWA to focus their work on the soil, livestock, and broader 'socio-economic and food security' aspects of climate-agriculture intersections. While KJWA offers a platform to discuss agrifood questions, these conversations remain siloed off to KJWA, which already lacks a general systems-level engagement with agrifood systems and their complexities.

The KJWA presented findings to the SBSTA/SBI of the UNFCCC in 2018 and 2019, though the work paused, with the rest of the world, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown of 2020. These findings included virtual workshops on 'Improved Livestock Management' including agro-pastoralism and on 'Socio-economic and Food Security Dimensions'. In 2021, KJWA organized a series of three inter-sessional, virtual workshops. The events involved a range of actors: from farm organizations to NGO leaders, researchers, Michael Fakhri, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, and the UN FAO's Committee on Food Security.

In June 2022, they arranged another virtual inter-sessional international workshop. These workshops, despite – or perhaps because of – virtual format, showed progress in delving deeper into the multi-faceted social, ecological, economic, and political dynamics of climate-agrifood intersections, as well as their disparities: 'Implementing sustainable approaches can render multiple [ecological] benefits for society' (xx). Though mired in bureaucratic generalities, this statement nevertheless shows noteworthy developments, lines of inquiry, co-analysis, and intervention. The KJWA/SBSTA/SBI also issued an 'Informal Note by the Co-Facilitators' that showed promising attentiveness and nuanced analysis. It begins, admirably, with anti-hunger commitments, but roots these in astute points on the disparities and injustices undergirding food insecurity (SBI and SBSTA, 2022, 2).

The COP27 KJWA urged 'parties and others to increase their efforts to promote sustainable agriculture, with a view to eradicating hunger and poverty while ensuring food security' and laid out a four-year joint work programme. This anti-climactic status-quo outcome nevertheless did keep alive an important trajectory to follow and hold to account. Meanwhile, the pace of shocks and compounding crises emanating from and within agrifood systems raises urgent questions about how – and if – these multinational mechanisms can rise to the challenges that abound.

Wasted opportunity on wasted food reduction

Arguably, the low-hanging fruit of agrifood system issues to address would be food wast Reducing food loss and waste is not just an effective way to address methane emissions, it also improves nutrition and hunger outcomes by increasing food availability and accessibility, with co-benefits for land and biodiversity outcomes (Project Drawdown, 2020; Gatto & Chepeliev, 2024). Even though actual mitigation remains difficult, recognizing it as a problem would certainly garner global consensus, on moral and equity grounds as well as ecological or economic. Or so we thought. The first 'Food COP' fell short of addressing global loss and waste of edible foods. Despite impressive build-up and pre-Conference preparation and momentum around wasted food as a key climate intervention, the topic saw limited traction at the formal negotiating halls of COP27. While the #123 Food Loss and Waste Pledge for Climate Action was kicked off at the conference, it is a voluntary pledge open to governments, individuals, institutions, and companies towards reaching the goals of Net Zero and SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) 12.3. Although the efforts are welcome, the voluntary nature of these pledges limits and fragments their impact without the structural framework of NDCs mainstreaming them, especially at COP where pledges are many. Effectively reaching goals of methane reduction and circular economies, requires concentrated systemic efforts through regulation and cross-sectoral collaborations across the government and public and private sectors.

Food waste and loss have become egregious environmental issues. Civil society experts on the problem reiterated the dire stats in the Food-related Pavilions of COP27 to clarify the call to action: Building a global governance structure that enables circular economies for wasted food would drastically decrease methane, a greenhouse gas 80 times more harmful than CO_2 for 20 years after it is released (UNEP, 2022). While

conventional agrifood systems thwart circularity, agroecological and regenerative systems deliberately utilize 'waste', keeping the nutrients and energy in a closed-loop cycle (Gille, 2012). The reduction of waste, and particularly wasted food, has immense impacts on equity in production, consumption, and allocation of resources. The COP offers the potential to address the scalar and geographical expansive risks associated with waste beyond simplistic technological fixes to tangibly address inequities.

Pete Pearson, Senior Director of Food Loss and Waste at the World Wildlife Fund, thought COP27 would usher in a global methane pledge grounded in the globally shared goal of wasted food reduction – it did not. In our interview with him, he reflected on the structural limitations of the COP, the lack of larger country buy-in to the issue, and the logistical challenge of changing NDCs or informing their agendas. The constrained negotiation spaces, the logistics of NDC review cycles and methodologies of mapping progress towards pledges limit the flexibility to add new goals to the agenda (Pearson, 2023). Likewise, Jesse Ribot, a human geographer of environmental justice and rural wellbeing, who has been at the COP since its inception, reiterated how the formalization of the process makes it difficult to introduce new thoughts and ideas or respond with the kind of urgency many issues require (RIbot, 2023). These structural challenges, lead to a path dependency in issue orientation. Thus, the formalized legitimacy of the UN COP, which brings nation states and other actors together, also curtails the scope of its impact.

In our own experience participating at COP27 and COP28, we saw firsthand how the enthusiasm for wasted food prevention consensus remained somewhat confined to the panels, panellists, and audience members at these particular sessions. According to Pearson, wasted food prevention would be well placed to enter the formal negotiations at COP and the NDCs if it gathers attention in industrialized countries like the United States, where the problem is glaring. Arguably, the crisis of lost and wasted food – generating 8-10% of global green house gas emissions globally and over 30-40% of food in the US (USDA, n.d.) – will inevitably garner further momentum for intervention at future COPs and in climate policy at large (UNEP 2024, XI). The COP28 official Declaration laid out five Aims, tucking into the fifth the goal of 'shifting from higher greenhouse gas-emitting practices to more sustainable production and consumption approaches, including by reducing food loss and waste' (COP28 Declaration on Food and Agriculture, 2023). The second of five Commitments also gave a shout-out to 'reducing food loss and waste' amidst reaffirmations of public-private partnerships and the World Trade Organization's dominance.

Yet, for agrarian movements, mass wasted food remains a symptom of broader dysfunctions of status quo food systems. The urgency of vast food waste gains particular potency – and efficacy – from the movements of those on the front lines of wasted food and the food injustices therein. Importantly, the multiple panels dedicated to wasted food prevention included leaders from a burgeoning global movement of waste-pickers – workers who labour, barely remunerated if at all, to sift through trash piles to separate recyclables, diverting organic materials away from landfills. The growing network of waste-picking unions from cities across the world made their way to the Conference of the Parties to explain their overlooked role in climate mitigation. Africa Climate Justice issued a Call for Action to 'Support essential services, food, water and healthcare system', that led with the goal to: 'Provide protective equipment for all health workers and essential workers on the frontline, including waste-pickers and garbage collectors, food workers, small-scale and subsistence food producers, etc.' (Africa Climate Justice Group, 2021). La Vía Campesina repeatedly calls for mobilizations to 'protect Mother Earth and demand the urgent implementation' of UNDROP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas). More recently, the LVC (2021), has decried food waste as an emblematic effect of extractive, toxic agrifood systems built for profit. These important engagements and discourses emerging from frontline communities provide key solutions to issues of food loss and waste that are yet to be addressed within the formalized structures of the COP but promise to be soon enough.

African COP that was not: what constitutes representation?

Meanwhile, back at the Blue Zone, amidst the flows and hubs, competing sound systems – each pavilion had its own mic system – rhythms emerged. The Indigenous Peoples' pavilion hosted reliably great sessions, replete with powerful activists, elders, youth leaders, giving long greetings in native languages with no linguistic relation to the six official United Nations languages. Calling out colonialism, re-declaring sovereignty, invoking cosmovisions, demanding justice for land defenders and water protectors killed or incarcerated for their ecological commitments that, they emphasized, benefit each one of us and all future generations. Astute political ecological analysis along with community building. A place to gather and regroup, a meeting place.

In addition to the issue of what was not included in these negotiations, an even more critical issue is who was not included. Promoted as 'The African COP' for its Egyptian location (though ironically Sinai falls in Asia not Africa), COP27 27 did indeed have robust, diverse, and impressive delegations from across the African continent. Was the African COP able to centre the diverse African voices, and especially those of the groups disproportionately directly impacted by climate crises? The African Food Sovereignty Alliance alleged an outright exclusion of African farmers and their expertise (AFSA, 2022). AFSA converged in Uganda in late February 2023 to debrief and publish their assessment of COP27: 'AFRICA'S FARMERS IGNORED AT COP27 CLIMATE TALKS', they contended, noting the total omission of agroecology – what delegations of African farmers had travelled to Sharm-el-Sheikh to promote – in the formal deliberations and deliverables.

Musa Usman Ndamba, Pastoralist and Vice National President of Mscouba, Cameroon from the African Food Sovereignty Alliance, led a delegation to COP27, and, in an interview with us, noted the disproportionate participation and influence of vested interests such as corporate lobbyists at the COPs. He highlights the uphill financial and logistical

struggle to bring a delegation of low-resource farmers and pastoralists to COPs and yet the years of successful capacity-building to equip such frontline community leaders to engage in the UNFCCC process. Reflecting specifically on African interests, Mr. Ndamba asserted the vast agroecological skills and heritage and potential of African communities and the continent at large to supply its own food:

> Africa is one of the continents where you do not need to talk about food insecurity. There is enough land to produce food without using chemicals or anything artificial. We do not need chemicals, GMOs, for example. We do not need this in Africa, but these things are imposed on us, due to weak leadership, due to weak negotiators (Ndamba, 2023).

When asked about the value of making the Herculean effort to come to COP meetings, Mr. Ndamba responded that the convergence of power required striving for direct engagement – and allowed for it at times. People can often obtain an audience with government representatives, negotiators, and others with whom they usually would not have access, just by virtue of being at the COP in person. In our interview, Mr. Ndamba reflected on the importance of the experience, the work that has emerged from participating in COP27 and the unprecedented mobilization by African delegates in driving change.

Given that negotiating positions and agendas are set well before the COP itself, our interviewees highlighted the importance of mobilizing and shaping discussions in the preparations leading to COP28. Reflecting on the COP itself, they noted that network building and access to negotiators and representatives continue to make attendance at these COPs valuable. Vivian Maduekeh**,** former Programme Coordinator with the Global Alliance for the Future of Food, which provided support for farmers and civil society actors from the global south to attend COP27, told us in her interview:

> 'There's value in those civil society spaces. In the end, it is human beings that make these decisions. And those spaces are spaces where governments, civil society, multilateral funders, come to the Blue Zones spaces. And if we can get certain topics on the agenda, you are more likely to create a strategy, which then influences countries' (Maduekeh, 2023a).

Despite potentially useful participation, many farmers, civil society actors, Indigenous groups and others still face significant barriers to attendance at these spaces. In a summary written after working to bring participants from the Global South to COP 27, the Global Alliance for the Future of Food identified several barriers to participation: badge access, budgetary constraints, lack of meaningful engagement in agenda setting, and alienation from an overly technical process (Global Alliance, 2022). The fact that English remains the de facto language spoken in these gatherings (Maduekeh, 2023b) represents another massive logistical and epistemic barrier. Virtual participation exacerbates this exclusion; livestreams and asynchronous recordings comprise the only ways to connect with the proceedings of the conference and its participants. This (along with a UN language proficiency) requires a strong, running internet connection with enough bandwidth to navigate a rich but often confusing organization of events; for a continent rife with digital divide, the online portal did not do much to solidify the African orientation of the Conference.

Mr. Ndamba expands that improving representation and accessibility would entail mobilizing finances, developing, and synthesizing the lived experiences and evidence emerging from farmers, generating awareness around them and lobbying from their perspectives. Additionally, the improvements will require creating networks to connect delegations in the region and paying for internet access and travel logistics to ensure access to conferences and build tangible representation, especially in the move towards COP28. These improvements, among others, will ensure that representatives are able to effectively engage with policymakers and negotiators to bring their issues and agendas to the table.

The structural rigidity of the COP has restricted its adaptive capacity and created obstacles where there could be opportunities for transformation. COP provides a significant forum bringing nation states together to discuss issues around climate change. However, the structural rigidity that defines the bones of the UN institutions and much of its geopolitics keeps the COP's inclusivity restricted to nation-state representation politics. The structural flaws embedded in the design of the COP and NDC cycles limit the pace of change and urgency needed to reach climate goals and reduce devastating impacts on frontline communities. Agrarian-based land defenders and climate justice activists, such as those represented in the large and growing continent-wide African Food Sovereignty Alliance, deliberately move beyond mere representation to acknowledge and actualise multiple worldviews that centre sidelined experiences and agroecological knowledge traditions. As the African Food Sovereignty Alliance grows in scope, scale, and power, how could their persistent strategies of coalition-building, and political education around agroecology as foundational for food sovereignty make further impacts on the UNFCCC COP meetings? Or, according to Mr. Ndamba and other AFSA leaders' presentations at COP27, how could they not?

Despite pavilions buzzing with agri-food knowledge and events, the First Food COP, in many ways, became the First Food COP that was not. Likewise, the African COP became the African COP that was not, according to African agrarian movements themselves. The intricate interdependencies of agri-food systems, from food waste to finance, biofuel to biodata, labour to land, did not transform COP27 official proceedings, but this very fact has subsequently galvanized new and expanded strength in agrarian movement urgency to amplify pressure on climate policy realms. In a literal way, momentum builds regarding the physical organization of COP itself. COP27 represented an obvious missed opportunity for circular design in planning and infrastructure. Trash bins overflowed and led to hallway and pavilion conversations on the need for food waste audits at COP28, ways for the COP to contribute agroecologically to its host city rather than merely take energy and resources and leave trash. The significant platform of COP could have been utilized to express and present much-needed structural shifts in food systems, starting by addressing its embeddedness in climate action, with the COP's organization and logistics itself. The landscape of the event could be a testament to and a lived learning of the principles of circularity, integrated thinking, and regenerative transitions required for resilience in the times of climate change – echoing the

work and goals of agrarian and grassroots movements that have been engaging these corridors, even before the first COP, and that increasingly focus their growing power on climate policy and climate justice.

Hidden power of agrarian movements

The diverse and divergent spectrum of food and agricultural initiatives and perspectives at COP27 paralleled the preceding year's UNFSS and counter-mobilization, as laid out above. But they had accrued long histories of mobilizing at the United Nations level, way before the 2021 UNFSS. Scholars, particularly those publishing in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, have chronicled the long durée of these movements, but a key milestone was the UN 1992 Conference on Environment and Development 'Rio Summit', which established the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Indigenous and land-based movements engaged the CBD directly, leading to the consequential Article 8(j) on Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Momentum for this had grown, in part, from the 1990 Continental Summit of the Indigenous Alliance of the Americas on 500 Years of Resistance, held in Quito, Ecuador: 'We have achieved common laws that have been accepted by the United Nations and the Organization of American States where it has been recognized that all peoples have the right to self-determination' (Continental Campaign of 500 Years of Indian Resistance, 1990). The Declaration of Quito lauded the ratification of Agreement #169 of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples adopted by the International Labour Organization, another key international referent by and for Indigenous community sovereignty.

Meanwhile, agrarian movements were contesting increasingly proprietary plant variety protection intellectual property rights and the broader political economy of agri-biotechnologies in the 1990s. These mobilizations around equitable access and benefit sharing (ABS) drove negotiations culminating in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, which launched in 2001 and came into force in 2004. A central orientation of the Treaty was for Farmers Rights to save seeds and participate in agrobiodiversity governance. Campesino-based mobilizations also made their way into – and inspired and shaped – CBD negotiations for the Nagoya Protocol in 2010 and the Aichi targets for biodiversity in 2010 (Graddy, 2014). Agrarian movements also effectively mobilized to legally protect land defenders in the landmark Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, also called the Escazú Agreement, for its Costa Rican location (Graddy-Lovelace, 2021).

La Vía Campesina and its affiliates, allies, and counterparts have also engaged and entered United Nations forums, with the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, but most directly, with the landmark 2018 UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP). UNDROP culminated seventeen years of intense targeted agrarian movement advocacy, starting with LVC's 2001 call for 'peasant rights' in UN Human Rights Commissions' debates on the 'right to development'. Claeys and Edelman chronicle the origins of the landmark UNDROP victory, back to LVC's 1996 decision, to bring its 'objectives to the international arena of the FAO, IMF, WB, WTO and other international forums of the United Nations and the ILO' (Claeys & Edelman, 2020, p. 1). Though LVC has deliberately distanced itself from international financial institutions which it views as adversaries, the massive grassroots alliance has agreed to engage directly with the United Nations, particularly through the UN FAO and its Committee on World Food Security (Borras, 2023; Claeys & Edelman, 2020; Edelman & Borras, 2016; Nyéléni, 2007). In their analysis of agrarian movements' impact on UNFCCC, Claeys and Delgado trace how

> Peasant and indigenous movements have been able to progressively create their own sense of globality in climate justice debates, by: (a) using and transforming the human rights framework, (b) seizing and creating international political opportunities, both inside and outside the UNFCCC process, and (c) advancing their own global framing of the climate issue, and in particular their own solutions to climate change. (2017)

The origin and impact of the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) merits particular attention, as Indigenous peoples' formal engagement at UNFCCC goes back to the 1998 COP and its Indigenous Peoples of North America Declaration. Thereafter, Indigenous participation expanded, and by 2001, indigenous peoples were recognized as a formal constituency within the UNFCCC. Indigenous and agrarian justice mobilizations around, against, at, and in the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties continued to converge and expand. At COP16 in Cancun, LVC launched the Cochabamba People's Agreement, centred in Andean Indigenous terms of La Pachamama.

Agrarian forces joined forces with climate justice movements, themselves built up over years of resistance, beginning at earlier climate COPs, such as COP13 in Bali and COP15 in Copenhagen (Tramel, 2016). These represent a 'joining up' of more localized movements on a larger scale (Chatterton et al., 2013). Land rights, land use, and pushing back on discourses of 'efficiency' seen to favour consolidation and displacement of smallholders galvanized were common ground that helped bring these diverse movements together.

While agrarian movements proactively boycotted the World Trade Organization with the goal of delegitimization, they have sought valiantly to engage with, against, but also through the UNFCCC and its Conference of the Parties. Clayes and Delgado concluded:

> Faced with a global climate regime that seeks to induce simplifications and reduce uncertainties in order to make the world "flat" (and facilitate the management of risk in public and private investments), indigenous and peasant movements have brought diversity and complexity to the fore. They have considerably transformed a multilateral process that was expected to be ruled by northern countries, and have influenced the global climate justice movement significantly (2017, p. 15).

Seven years later, the influence has grown, and requires more attention by climate policymakers and activists, particularly because such frontline advocacy has emerged beyond standard non-governmental frameworks, and often in opposition to NGOs speaking on behalf of them (McKeon, 2009).

Our analysis builds on that by other agrarian studies scholars, such as Yaşın, who trace the 'agrarianization of the climate justice (movement) in relation to the environmentalization of the agrarian question and agrarian movements' (2022, p. 1371), and others evaluating the transnational food sovereignty movement as one of the world's '"most potent" world-historical subjects or anti-systemic social forces' (Yasin, quoting Martinez-Alier; McMichael, 2008; Van Der Ploeg, 2014).

This context provides key clues to agrarian movements' surprising and invisible mobilizations and impacts on international politics. It also pertains directly, though again subtly, to COP27's landmark victory: the Loss and Damage Fund. If many pavilions buzzed with agrifood research findings and policy proposals, debates and coalition-building, the official documents coming out of the Accords were remarkable for their absence of agrifood commitments. From the Mitigation to the Adaptation and Co-benefit, official decisions resulted in no global pacts for meaningful Nationally Determined Contributions pledges. The lone bright spot of the COP27 – the creation of the long-fought-for Loss & Damage Fund – leaves room for restitution of resources for agroecological climate survival but does not focus on food and agriculture explicitly. Yet, it broke through the barriers to reach political reality because of persistent grassroots organizing with deep land-based and land-defending roots.

Likewise, even COP27's novel Bridgetown Initiative needs to be contextualized within decolonial mobilizations with agrarian roots. This Initiative, named for the Barbadian town wherein it was launched, seeks to restructure international finance institutions (IFI), such as the International Monetary Foundation and the World Bank, to finance the Loss and Damage Fund. At the end of the COP27 proceedings, Barbadian Prime Minister Mia Mottley announced a breathtaking proposal to solve the political impasse of nation-states failing to finance the new Loss and Damage Fund for global south climate adaptation and mitigation, by moving billions, if not trillions, of IFI dollars to low-income countries bearing brunt of climate disasters. Realistically, a substantial portion of these grants and climate survival and climate disaster recovery projects would involve food security, climate-resilient agriculture, seafood, and fishery protections, and other agrifood-related efforts for food sovereignty in the face of climate disasters. Scholars analysing agrarian movements' complex relationship with state politics note that 'Food sovereignty provides the key organizing frame for multiple place-based confrontations against government-sanctioned agribusiness interventions into the lifeworlds of traditional, peasant and indigenous peoples' (Routledge et al., 2018, p. 7).

Here, the framework of agrarian climate justice encompasses the movement convergences at work in fields, streets, and now hallways of UNFCCC power. Borras and Franco describe its burgeoning valence: 'A vague but promising notion of agrarian climate justice is getting constructed, albeit inchoately, by various social justice advocacies and by resistance from below', they write (2018), 'grounded in *redistribution, recognition, restitution, regeneration, and resistance*' rooted in land tenure, access, and use. 'In short, agrarian justice and climate justice have become dialectically linked: one cannot exist without the other. But such intertwining is not without contradictions; it is neither automatic nor static; rather, it is always context-specific, dynamic, and iterative'. Accordingly, the agrarian-based land defenders and climate justice activists deliberately moved beyond mere representation, to a multiplicity of worldviews that centre those suffering the brunt of the crisis and whose knowledge traditions have the most expertise on climate survival and justice. While there is a huge realm of research and now investments and interventions, a growing subset of organizations and organizers focus explicitly on the equity dimensions: on the intersection of food and farm/land justice with climate justice, arguing the two goals are irrevocably interdependent.

Addendum to COP 28 & 29

Many similar debates unfolded about the future of food at COP28 in Dubai in December 2023, yet with a few key differences. Unlike COP27, where the various food pavilions were located far apart, the three food-focused pavilions were in the same building. A shared WhatsApp group for those working on food systems also gave a sense of greater coherence. Of particular focus, in the WhatsApp exchanges, was the inclusion of the language of 'food systems' in the Global Stocktake. Delegates cooperated over the WhatsApp group to target delegates and negotiators from countries who were resistant to including the language. Ultimately, the effort to include food systems framing was successful, though only regarding adaptation rather than mitigation and emissions reduction. Yet, as one delegate observed, the real work of coming to some sort of agreement on what exactly the food system means lies ahead. It remains to be seen to what degree and how the equity, land rights, and sovereignty concerns of agrarian movements will make it into the framing of future COPs; their global momentum portends more impact.

COP28 advanced both the focus on agri-food systems as the crux to climate action and the industry-favored technological orientation. Culminating in the 'Emirates Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems, and Climate Action, signed by 134 world leaders, the Conference did usher in a momentous global agreement to reduce methane production by 30% by 2030. Agri-food industry methane emissions remain vaguely referenced and insufficiently targeted, much less regulated. The African Food Sovereignty Alliance decried the stalled negotiations on the Sharm el-Sheikh Joint Work on Agriculture and Food Security, which, they disparage as at an ineffectual 'stalemate', and failed yet again to take seriously the vast potential of agroecology for climate resilience, adaptation, justice, and survival.

Meanwhile, COP28 expanded and deepened agrarian climate justice coalition-building, by rooting it in demilitarization. COP27's civil society spaces were already flying 'No War, No Warming' signs and connecting the dots between military-industrial complexes, vast emissions, and land/food dispossession. This theme erupted to the forefront a year later. By 2023, a campaign emerged to boycott COP28 (https://boycottcop28.org/), on multiple grounds: from the host country's mass fossil fuel extraction and emission to its human rights violations. Meanwhile, as Israel's siege of Gaza extended from October to

November, global communities heeded the Boycott Divest Sanction (BDS) movement's call to boycott COP28 in solidarity with Palestine. In coordination with Grassroots Global Justice Alliance cancellation of its delegation for the first time in fifteen years, La Vía Campesina also joined the boycott: 'In solidarity with the peasants, fisherfolk and working families of Occupied Palestine, we stand united in our global demand that all people and governments act now to end Israel's genocidal war on Palestinians, both in Gaza and the West Bank' (Ndabezinhle, 2023). Going further, La Via Campesina lambasted the alleged successes of COP28d declaring that the Leaders Declaration on Resilient Food Systems and Sustainble Agriculture spearheaded by the COP28 presidency would further entrench corporate markets and technologies. Under the banner of sustainability, these initiatives do more to concentrate power and resources than to reduce emissions from the industrial food chain, which account for more than a third of total global emissions!' (La Via Campesina, 2023). Other large agrarian and agri-food organizations, Grassroots International, Regeneration International, and Organic Consumers Association, followed suit (Leu, 2023). GRAIN signed on to the boycott, lamenting that 'regenerative agriculture was a good idea until corporations got a hold of it' (GRAIN, 2023). COP28 features the term, which is

> gaining traction in policy circles, investor conferences and supermarket shelves. But it is just the latest iteration of an ongoing corporate strategy to undercut support for agroecology and shore up corporate profits amid multiple crises caused by the model of industrial agriculture they depend on'.

In their assessment of the failure of COP28's fixation on high-tech fixes of carbon markets, green hydrogen, geoengineering, they conclude: 'As far as we are concerned, pursuing and achieving food sovereignty is the only way to combat the capitalist solutions proposed by the carbon market and the only way to stop the climate crisis in its tracks' (GRAIN, 2023b). COP28 boycott and civil society demonstrations braided in a third interrelated goal of extricating from militarism, with its ecocidal fall-outs, land captures, and weaponization of hunger, as in the case of Gaza and Palestine.

Conclusions: is it worth it? The power of convergence

For so few badges. So many people have sent and sought so many emails, and authorizations to mill around these conference hallways. They have met with so many officials to fill out so many forms to represent so many people back home. In this vast convergence merge so many people – and so many absences. It is hard to fathom, much less unpack or understand, the myriad tangled layers of representation at work and at odds in these conference rooms and waiting lines. How many people carry with them hundreds if not thousands of others, to ensure the maximum popular presence, condensed into lone interlocutors, heavily crowdsourced, heavily laden with expectations back home. 'Tell them our whole region is underwater'. 'Our ancestral islands drown as we speak'. 'Our livestock die of thirst'. 'Our freshwater wanes fast'. Tell them. But who is listening?

COP27 and COP28 served as sequential microcosms for this divergent convergence of interest and urgency regarding the interrelation of climate and agrifood crises. The official line-up of food- and agriculture-related pavilions as well as agrifood-focused sessions and presentations show the sheer breadth of conversations and orientations, and further foregrounds and resourced those already well-resources.

The whole experience – in person, virtual, or second-hand via news – begs the question, 'is it even worth it?' A delegate from a large international NGO noted the professional connections, the funding networks, and the activist coalition-building opportunities from in-person participation: they told us in an interview, 'We cannot not come. Everyone is here'. However, the immense time and financial commitment required to attend such international forums becomes more burdensome each year, particularly on the limited resources of smaller peasant, agrarian, and food justice organizations. Shefali Sharma formerly of IATP, lamented in an interview with us the resource-intensive 'time suck' of attending COP, but maintains that it remains crucial as 'damage control' (Sharma, 2023). Meanwhile, organizations with more resources may effectively drown out the conversation by affording to have a much larger presence. This is evident in the doubling of the number of agribusiness representatives at COP27 from COP26 (Carlile, Sherrington, & Healy, 2022) – and continuing to high levels at COP28 With such path dependencies, the price of trying to influence the climate conversation, for many grassroots agrarian and climate justice groups, can become too high to maintain.

Yet, there is a palpable power to participating in such a convergence in real time. Few times in the world, apart from religious pilgrimages, do so many people from all over the continents and languages of the world travel across so many oceans and land masses, so many militarized borders, so many hard-fought-for visas, passport forms, travel itinerary, boarding passes. The long histories of inequities that have subjected people, systematically excluded them, and pushed them into vulnerabilities only extrapolated by slow and fast climate disasters – need to be named and given a voice, as they are. The COP offers an opportunity to do just that, to bear witness and to hold accountable the structural dynamics that perpetuate agrarian distress and climate injustice – and to find others from around the world suffering parallel injustices, asking parallel questions, and forging parallel mutual aid networks grounded in agroecology, food sovereignty, and agrarian climate justice orientations.

Arguably, the UNFCCC Conference of Parties, as a recent bureaucratic assemblage, could shift shape. Structural critiques have emerged from grassroots, civil society, scholar, and governmental sectors, with calls for different models such as regional annual COPs for place-specific adaptation funding and mitigation regulation, coupled with biennial or triennial global meetings. Mustering the energy to contest corporate capture at the next COP becomes harder with each passing, corporate-captured COP. Meanwhile, the international forum of UN governance and thus UNFCCC maintains a presumption and assumption that national governments do and will have temporal continuity – that a pledge in one year will carry on and through the years. But the reality is that increasingly, national governments – democracies in particular – are in a political pendulum between 'left' and 'right', between

neoliberal-to-progressive environmental commitments to reactionary-to-ecocidal refutations of climate regulation (and even climate change itself). Even if the power of agrarian movements does not seem apparent, it has been persistently making inroads to push their agendas on the negotiating blocks, and to share and connect with others working to build inclusive and just climate transitions. This is exemplified by the works of AFSA, LVC, Climate Action Network (CAN), Global Grassroots Justice Alliance (GGJA), and other BIPOC-led intergenerational coalitions grounding climate justice in land defence, water protection, food sovereignty, and solidarity in the face of exponential militarism (Graddy-Lovelace & Ranganathan, 2023).

The existential inquiry, if UNFCCC Conference of the Parties merits their efforts and emissions, leads straight to the power of the presence of coalitions as they forge and grow. Who will hold the corridors of power in check? Why cede that space, with its latent potential for climate justice and governance, with its inroads demanding Loss & Damage, more transparency, structural shift towards integrative, agroecological research and interventions. As scholars and civil society grapple with the worth of the COP effort, the agrarian movements, in all their breadth and diversity, continue to coalesce their burgeoning power against, around, within, through the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties – and way beyond.

Notes

1. From Graddy-Lovelace collaborative event (auto)ethnography notes, 2022.
2. Nationally Determined Contributions are the core way in which countries track and make commitment to reduce their emissions.
3. The Blue Zone area hosts negotiation rooms, pavilions, and side event space which one needs a negotiator or observer badge to enter.
4. The UNFSSS is an ambitious attempt to set the stage for global food systems transformation to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), referenced more deeply in later sections.
5. The interviews were semi-structured. The interviewees were named/anonymized according to their preferences.
6. IPES-Food is an international panel of food system experts that is supportive of agroecological and right to food approaches.

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Dr. Samara Brock works at the intersection science and technology studies and critical food scholarship to understand contested food system futures. She has worked for over 15 years with NGOs, governments, and foundations focused on food justice and sustainable agriculture. Her current PhD research, based at the Yale School of the Environment, engages with prominent transnational organizations and networks working to transform the future of the global food system.

Bhamini Jain is a sustainable development scholar-practitioner specializing in regenerative food systems, climate change, and driving systemic change to enable communities to thrive, not just survive. They leverage their interdisciplinary experience in research, advocacy, on-the-ground work, policy, art, and corporate sustainability to support community-led alternatives for just socioecological-economic transitions.

Positionality statement

The authors have worked closely on food systems in roles with on-ground actors such as farmers, NGOs, government, foundations, and academia. Their work has intersected with and has supported agrarian and climate justice movements closely over the years. This article was subbmitted for *Climate & Development* Special Feature: '"Power and (In)justice in Global Climate Governance: Collaborative Event Ethnography of the UNFCCC Process"'.

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