



What was achieved at COP28 in food and farming?

This briefing note is based on a Chatham House event, held on the 14 December 2023, by the Environment and Society Team.

Overall, what happened?

COP28 was thought to be the biggest multilateral event in history, with 100,000 people in attendance in Dubai. It marked the first Global Stocktake, which looked at progress on meeting the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement (COP21) goal to keep warming below 1.5 °C of pre-industrial levels.

In a historical move, almost 200 countries signed an agreement to transition away from fossil fuels – the first time such a commitment towards a fossil fuel-free world has been made at COP. There was also a commitment to triple renewable energy capacity and double energy efficiency improvements by 2030.

Around 160 countries signed the Emirates' Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems and Climate Action. This was a step forwards in recognising the importance of food and farming in relation to climate.

However, in contrast, food and farming were only included in the main COP agreement in terms of adaptation, not mitigation. The text also only specified transition away from fossil fuels in the energy system – missing out the food system's deep reliance on fossil fuels, in for example nitrogen fertiliser production.

[The final COP28 text](#) calls on parties to be: "Transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net zero by 2050 in keeping with the science.

The operational organisation of the Loss and Damage Fund for developing countries was passed on the first day. Around \$700m was pledged (a drop in the ocean).

The UAE presidency vowed that food and agriculture would take centre stage a COP28 – and it was the first COP – Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Climate Change - to have a thematic day dedicated to food, agriculture and water. But was anything achieved?



[Prof Tim Benton](#), director of research at Chatham House, and leader of the Environment and Society Team, was at COP28. He explains what happened:

How have COPs historically dealt with food and farming?

COPs have always historically dealt with sources of emissions – and in the land use space, the sources of emissions primarily come from land use change and agriculture, so that's been the focus for a long time.

Over the last 10 years or so, thinking about food systems as a *system* has become quite common. And the food system, like the energy system, effectively links up supply and demand. So just as energy efficiency is a means of reducing the need for fossil fuels, it is as important as the production of fossil fuels itself.

And the food systems view effectively requires you to link up the supply side and demand side and say; 'Actually, we can reduce emissions from agriculture by changing our demands for food as well as by changing the way that we farm.' In addition, recognising the need to increase resilience to ensure food security requires action across the system, from 'farm to fork'. So that's why food system transformation has come up the agenda.

Where was food and farming at COP28?

Food accounts for about a third of all greenhouse gas emissions. So it's really important – we've got a plan for energy, we've got a plan for transport, food was the next big thing on the block.

There was an Emirates' Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems and Climate Action – it was signed by about 160 countries. And whilst it wasn't part of the formal negotiated text, it was an important signal: Countries were saying they've recognised that food influences climate change, and is influenced by climate change, and transforming the system is important to ensure a sufficient, resilient supply of nutritious food for all.



We also launched The Alliance of Champions for Food System Transformation, a small group of highly ambitious countries co-chaired by Brazil, Norway and Sierra Leone, who are deliberately trying to increase the pace of food system transformation and change the art of the possible.

Food and farming in the agreed text

So from the outside, food was very prominent at COP. But, and here's the but – 160 heads of state signed the Emirates' Declaration, but when it came to where food appeared in the formal text of the Global Stocktake, it was only in passing.

There is nothing in the mitigation section of the Global Stocktake that points directly at food. In fact, transitioning away from fossil fuels is only referred to as transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems. So it doesn't account for heavy industry, it doesn't account for fossil fuel use in producing nitrogen fertiliser, for example. There is a mention of methane within the mitigation section, but agriculture is not called out within that. And in the past, where people have targeted methane, it's largely been from the fossil fuel sector.

Food systems do appear in the Global Stocktake text, but only in the adaptation section – and that is within building resilience in food systems. So 160 heads of state said 'this is important' by signing the Emirates' Declaration, but when it came to the negotiated bit, food systems are hardly there at all.

So either negotiators weren't listening, or the subtext is that governments are quite content with the idea of building today's system to make it more resilient to climate impacts. And less interested in the whole issue about what should be grown, how it should be grown, what should be eaten, how should it be eaten – and the mitigation of GHGs that can come from changing diets and agricultural practice. Of course, it is hugely politically difficult. But I would hope that in the next cycle of NDCs, at least some governments start tackling the demand side, as well.

So yes, food was central to the debate. But it wasn't central to the Global Stocktake, and the negotiated outcomes in the way that is necessary to get our food system transformation really on course, with the 1.5C agenda. To do that we would have to start tackling some of the really



thorny issues, like reducing meat consumption in the Global North, whilst allowing the Global South to increase its meat consumption from non-intensive systems.

In summary, the outcomes were broadly what was expected, but not what was hoped.

*You can watch the full webinar on [YouTube](#) or the Chatham House [Website](#).

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