



Tim Benton: What next for food and farming at UNFCCC COP?

This is an edited transcript of an interview/ webinar with [Prof Tim Benton](#) (Chatham House, University of Leeds), conducted by [Prof Neil Ward](#) (University of East Anglia) on 14 November 2023 in the run up to COP28, which Tim was attending. Tim and Neil are co-leads of the [AFN Network+](#). You can also [watch the webinar](#) or [listen to the podcast](#).

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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What are COPs?

The country signatories (parties) of the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meet annually at a conference bringing together around 30,000-40,000 people.

These conferences are COPs and the point of them is twofold: For the parties to negotiate progress towards the Paris Agreement (signed at COP21 to keep global warming below 1.5C), and for civil society, in the broad sense, to be there to hold governments to account, to talk to people, and to raise the issue of climate change. It therefore becomes a huge global moment. This year's COP is COP28 and held in Dubai.

What's your role at Chatham House and why do you go to COPs?

Chatham House is an international affairs think tank formed soon after the First World War to try and create a safe space for governments to talk to each other. Its mission is to help governments and society build a sustainably secure, just, and prosperous world, and we are often seen as an independent interlocutor and broker of debates and knowledge transfer.

With my specialised interest in climate change and food I go to COPs because there is a lot of space there for influencing negotiations behind the scenes and talking to people in my neck of the woods -



it's the best place in the world if you want to talk to people who are like minded. This year I'm working with a range of governments to progress the issue of food at a diplomatic level.

Since you've been attending and following COPs, have you noticed any key changes?

That's a big one. The first COP I went to was COP21 in Paris in 2015 and of course the Paris Agreement was a huge milestone. Back in the early years of the 2010s we were broadly on course for somewhere between 3.7 to 4.8 degrees of warming - but now we're on course for somewhere around 2.4 to 2.6 degrees of warming.

So you can argue that over the last 10 years or so, progress has been made: We are transitioning the energy system, or at least we're electrifying it and while we can debate whether or not we are making enough progress on reducing fossil fuel use, we're certainly increasing our renewables.

Since I've been going to COPs they have become bigger and there's been more of a civil society component and pushback. You can't now be a negotiator at COP without seeing the weight of public opinion there is for climate change action. So that's quite a useful foil, in the sense that civil society is the place where people can actually talk to governments.

For example, if you're a member of an observer institution (e.g. civil society organisation, think tank, academic) and you get into the 'Blue Zone' (the diplomatic zone at the conference), you might be in the same room as John Kerry or a president. So there is space for not necessarily influencing the agenda directly, but allowing civil society's feelings about climate change to be felt.

But, I think the biggest thing post-COP26 in Glasgow, is the way that it feels like the agenda is going backwards, as opposed to going forwards.

This year's COP will conclude the first ever Global Stocktake, a process to determine if the world is on track to limit warming to 1.5C - is it?

Simple answer – no. The Paris Agreement in essence is quite simple - that we have a global agreement to keep climate change to under 2C with efforts towards 1.5C, and to check what progress is being made. Countries have a long term target - net zero - and they publish five-year plans detailing



nationally determined contributions (NDCs), meaning what actions they are taking to reduce emissions. At the end of every five year cycle, the Global Stocktake assesses the progress that's being made and whether or not we are on course.

The Global Stocktake published a synthesis technical report in September this year, and that showed that we are way off course, to the extent that our projected greenhouse gas emissions in 2030 are about twice as high as they should be. So if we were to be on a 1.5 to two degree trajectory, we would have to shrink emissions, which some people say would equivalent to shrinking the global economy by about half.

And so we're a very, very long way away from where we should be and I think everybody in civil society can feel that palpably, as we've seen in the UK the backtracking on net zero commitments, such as the reduction in the ambition of our plans for boiler phase outs and the opening of new North Sea oil and gas licences.

It feels like the political will to drive things ahead is not driving things ahead, just at the time when it is becoming very clear that the action that should be being undertaken is not being undertaken.

One of the main criticisms about COP is that it's all talk and no action. What's your impression about how the COP process is working in the face of criticisms?

Some people are critical that COP has become a process and is not driven by tangible activity, but by relatively abstract goals such as 1.5C or net zero, rather than the world getting together and saying, "how are we going to tackle this? How are we going to cooperate for food system transformation or an energy transformation or to protect rainforests?"

There has been a huge amount of pledging (the UK Government has been very good at this) and it's relatively safe to do so, as delivery might be decades away. The attitude is: We might not have the technology to sign up, but we're going to invest in some research to see if we can innovate our way out of these problems. So there have been a plethora of pledges.

But, if we come back to where we were in 2010 (pre Paris Agreement), we were looking at a much more significant climate change impact than we are looking at now. Having said that, 2.4C to 2.6C of



warming is still frightening. We've now reached about 1.5C and this year alone has been horrendous in terms of the actual pain that has been caused all around the world with floods, storms, hurricanes, heat waves and wildfires. Somewhere between 60 and 100 million people have been made homeless this year because of floods and fires.

Tangibly, whether or not 1.5C or 2C is where we want to end up, we're way off course for that. So in a sense, the COPs are failing, because we are not actually driving the agenda as fast as we need to, to tackle the scale of the issues. And politically, of course, it's difficult.

What about food systems – is it fair to say they've been largely absent from the COP process to date? And if so, why is that?

Yes, and there are two basic reasons. The first is that under UNFCCC climate change was first cast as an emissions issue. So obviously this includes fossil fuel burning, but it also includes land-use change and land-use as a source of emissions. This meant that up to COP27, agriculture was seen as an area of emissions, which created focus on innovation of supply and therefore sustainable intensification to reduce emission intensity.

The second reason first struck me at an IPCC plenary on the food and land report. And that was that most governments who attended were accompanied by representatives of their agricultural ministries. And when you talk to the agricultural ministries, most of them frame their mission as a trade ministry. So they see agriculture as an outdoor factory to produce goods for global markets and export.

And so when you take a food systems approach – which by definition requires you to think about supply and demand and the interrelationship between them – anything that squashes and changes demand, such as changing the composition of diets, reducing waste etc, changes the incentives for primary production. This is politically and economically seen as shooting yourself in the foot.

So for both of those reasons – that it's orientated around supply and farming innovation to reduce emissions, and that it's politically difficult and agriculture is seen as for economic growth – food systems have taken a while to emerge from the shadow of energy and transport transformations, which have been the primary focus of COPS so far.



Do you think there will be more focus on food systems at this COP (COP28 in Dubai)?

The Emirates are hosting the presidency and are very keen on food system transformation, and there will be a presidential declaration around recognising the centrality of tackling climate through tackling food, and vice versa. There has also been of course, the COPs for the Biodiversity Convention, which have made a big commitment in the global biodiversity framework, towards protecting 30% of the land area by 2030. So you have two big sister conventions, CBD and UNFCCC, that means you have to start thinking about nature alongside about climate.

And of course, the issue that we've had post invasion of Ukraine by Russia, is food price spikes. So food security is very high on the political agenda and most people can see the interrelationship between food, climate, and food security, and biodiversity loss, particularly through land use conversion, and intensification of agriculture. And so the three things are coming together as an important broadening of the focus away from energy transitions and transport.

Does the fact that food is increasingly on the agenda mean COPs will start to drive more change in agri food systems within each country?

Well, theoretically yes. But again it comes back to the political issue, in the sense that most governments don't want to think about intervention on the demand side, because economic growth is driven by consumption growth. And if you're saying we need to eat less and eat differently, then that seems counterproductive from an economic growth perspective.

But the Global Stocktake technical report says that transformation of *systems* provides the opportunity for rapid and wholesale change in emissions and that food is part of that. So I think within the negotiation agenda, food system transformation should play a much more active role.

But because UNFCCC works by unanimity rather than consensus, everybody has to agree to take a food systems approach, otherwise it doesn't get into the negotiated final outcomes. And that is really politically difficult because there are some countries which end up blocking because they don't see it as in their national interests.



So we're working with a relatively small group of governments to try and build a coalition of countries that really want to tackle climate and pollution, and build nutritious diets, food security, farmer livelihoods, and nature – simultaneously. These are countries that really want to work their way through those trade-offs, to expand the space of what is actually possible if you have a government that wants to drive things ahead.

Are you able to say which of the countries are most predisposed to take that integrated approach?

No, but we've talked to about 40 governments over the last 18 months. But around 40% of the world is going to have domestic elections this year, so there are quite a few countries that we've been talking to who are interested, but they're at the tail end of the government, and they don't know what the next government will be.

So, as with much coalition building, it's a journey. Probably by COP30, we will have a reasonably large number of countries that are committing. But also the war in the Middle East and Ukraine does mean that governments are distracted by a whole range of other issues at the moment, and climate change is not necessarily on top of their domestic agendas.

In terms of food and farming interests, who are the most prominent organisations present at COPs?

The heart of the negotiations are done by country teams – typically civil servants. But also staff are seconded onto the teams to add texture, colour and context to negotiations. And certainly one of the issues in the fossil fuel space is how many fossil fuel lobbyists have been part of official delegations – some huge number running into thousands.

Similarly, big industrial exporting countries often have representatives of industry as part of their associate membership of delegations. Looking at civil society, there is a whole range of interests represented at COPs, including conservation organisations, and those interested in food, etc.

The other thing is that health is also coming up the agenda, and the impacts of climate change on health. So there is a growing nexus of health, food security, nutrition security, and interest from civil society within that space.



How can ordinary people, who might not get a Blue Zone badge, engage with and participate in COP?

Normally at COPs there's a Blue Zone, which is for the blue badge holders, who are the official observers and members of delegations. And then there's a Green Zone, a society zone, and that is open to members of the public if they can make their way to Dubai.

There is very little read across from the Green Zone to the Blue Zone. And in Sharm-el-Sheikh (COP27) and Glasgow (COP26) the Green Zone was very much separate from the negotiating zone so that negotiators didn't see what was going on and didn't hear the demonstrations.

My biggest worry in this space, is that while citizens on a global basis might feel climate change is happening and worrying, COP and the Paris Agreement are so abstract that there is not enough political push from citizens to drive the political space bigger. There is just a lot of fear from our politicians that going too far too fast – whether talking about lifestyle choices, flying less, or energy transitions – is a political deadzone. And we've seen that very much with some of Rishi Sunak's rowing back on targets.

So the best way that somebody can engage, if they're not going to COP or looking at the events or negotiations online, is just to talk about it, to champion the issue, to raise the profile. Talk to your friends, talk to your colleagues, talk to your families.

What worries me most is that climate change runs away from us after passing 1.5 over the next few years. By 2050, we might be 2C warmer, by which time it's going to be too late for a lot of people in the world. And what I don't want to happen is for citizens to wake up in 2035 and say, "Oh, now is the time to act", because that's 20 years too late.

Q&A FROM WEBINAR PARTICIPANTS

I find it amazing that there is so much reluctance to talk about a global strategy to reduce meat and dairy consumption, as well as the number of farmed animals globally, given all the scientific evidence, and amazing potential to reduce emissions, store carbon, boost biodiversity, and fight world hunger. What are your thoughts on that?



A huge issue is that we've designed our global systems, energy systems and food systems, in a way that creates a great incumbency issue, a great power issue, that feeds across from big industry to economic growth thinking.

So the challenge of the livestock sector is not that it's a major sector that produces a lot of emissions. The challenge is how, as a politician, do you transition out of the sector or convince people in that sector to sell less, perhaps sell better, and convince citizens that cheap beef burgers are a bad idea?

Yes, there is a lot of evidence about emissions from livestock, but there's a lot of evidence about climate change and the harms that climate change will cause. And yet, when you look at most of the fossil fuel producing countries, they are planning to increase their fossil fuel extraction for the next decades. Because that's where they're making the profit, and that's where their economic power comes from, and that's therefore where their political power comes from – from politicians who support that economic sector.

So that's why I think the real issue is how can citizens put more pressure on the system to allow politicians to say “yes, I won't be voted out of my job at the next election, if I say people should eat less meat or farm in a different way.”

Should we be trying to reframe how we communicate food systems and climate change to get more buy-in from the public? Someone has pointed to the FrameWorks Institute, which looks at how people think and how social issues and science can be reframed to create action and change thinking.

I wrote a piece a couple of weeks ago that was in Nature Food, asking this question in a slightly different way. Traditionally the academic community sees its role as finding evidence and then giving it to politicians to make of what they want with. I think that is far too complicit, because that avoids the question of whether traditional economic thinking – economic growth – is the best measure of societal wellbeing. And then what role markets might have in the solution, and whether or not demand side issues really need to be pressed harder, and how do you do that.

As an academic community, we often just take it as read that these are the politics of today, and so how do we provide evidence for today's politicians? Actually one of the questions we should be asking is, how can we change the political mindset? And part of that question is how can we change the mindset



of citizens so that they make it politically possible for politicians to think in radical ways? So yes we do need to reframe some of these issues and get out of this thinking that eternal economic growth is the be-all and end-all of national wellbeing.

How does working in this field for such a long time and seeing everything dragging, make you feel personally? How do you navigate working on all of this without getting downbeat?

Well, I do get downbeat. The last few months have actually been quite mentally hard, and some of my colleagues feel very similarly. The librarian at Chatham House came up to me a couple of months ago and said, "I've just read a book about the psychology of climate change and I was struck by how many people in that book had PTSD because they were working on pushing this boulder uphill".

I did a podcast last week and they asked me "what are you optimistic about and what are you pessimistic about?". I'm optimistic that we, as a species, can solve these issues – we've got most of the solutions at our fingertips.

But what I'm pessimistic about increasingly, is whether or not we will choose or allow the choice to deal with these issues, or whether we'll be just driven along by the behemoth that is our current economic system, and the difficulty of changing that, because that's what we're used to and that's what we feel comfortable with him.

How would you assess the UK government's approach to the food systems transition agenda going into COP?

Henry Dimbleby did a lovely report on the National Food strategy, and although it's not totally absolutely ambitious, it's the most ambitious that almost any other government has published – or commissioned, as it was an independent report to government.

But the mood music on the day it was published, was Boris Johnson and several other cabinet ministers saying "Oh, we're never going to intervene in people's diets. We're never going to tell people what to eat. We're never going to put taxes on meat. We're never going to do this." That was three years ago. We then had a disaster of a Food Strategy White Paper, and we've had Rishi Sunak's seven beans and meat taxes debacle rolling back from net zero.



And all of that shows that at a political level, there is no appetite for thinking about food system transformation, in the sense of encouraging people, incentivising people, helping people eat more healthily, with a lower footprint that has zero tractability politically at the moment.

But having said that, there are a whole number of people in the civil service who see the argument, buy the argument, and are thinking deliberately about the argument and pushing to make the gains that can be made.

So to sum up, the UK is not an ambitious country for food system transformation. It's putting all of its eggs in the technical basket in the sense of how can we sustainably intensify food production. But it's not really dealing with the food systems approach of how do we change the demand side and change the supply side to reduce our overall footprint and provide healthier diets more sustainably and more affordably for people.

If COP negotiations are led by a country teams, how to global food brands contribute to the discussion?

They piggyback on to some countries, but they also have huge economic power. To illustrate this, some years ago I was at the US Department for Agriculture when the World Health Organisation published its sugar guidelines to restrict sugar intake to a certain level. And I was told by the undersecretary that the next day, President Obama got a letter saying that "if you agree to this, there will be jobs lost within the economy, because the sugar economy in America is very, very large".

So that's the sort of political power that big industry has, whether it's big fossil fuels, big agriculture, or big food, because the political agenda around jobs and economic growth holds sway. And so there is a lot of space for lobbying for the status quo. And as a tactic, industry has gone from not *denying* climate change anymore, but to delaying climate change action, by arguing that it's too difficult, i.e. we can't do it, let's maintain the status quo, because we're making quite a lot of money from the way the world is at the moment.

Is the COP process fit for purpose? Are there other negotiating forums that would be better?



It's fit for purpose in one way, but it is very process driven and good at designing ever better ways of creating NDCs and assessing progress. Simon Sharpe (Chatham House) wrote a book called Five Times Faster, where he points out that if you get countries together and agree on a set of tangible deliverables, then you can make progress five times faster, which is what we need to do.

Within the COP26 agenda in Glasgow, there were things called The Campaigns, and one was about transport, one was about energy. Those sectors, like food, have globalised supply chains. If you get all of the major players together to agree on something, such as the standards for a battery or a battery charger, then it becomes easier for industry to invest on a globalised supply chain basis rather than on a domestic basis.

So some countries are forming clubs on technical aspects, and getting together to try and tackle things in an ambitious way. What we're trying to do with our coalition of countries is to do a similar sort of thing – get countries together, to learn from each other, to support each other, to trade with each other and drive things in a way that will show other countries that it is possible.

This is important because what I hear most from countries as I travel around the world talking to people is “show us the country that's done this” and no country has transitioned out of fossil fuels. No country has really tackled food system transformation in the way that I mean it, because the first mover disadvantage is huge in terms of economic competitiveness.

Could creating decentralised food and energy systems, based on small scale farmers, small scale home energy production, be an alternative to the top-down COP process? Could this kind of civil action accelerate change?

That's a very good question. We at the AFN Network+ have recently done some scenarios work about how the world might be in 2050. If you look at one extreme, the world could be completely globalised, completely cooperative, completely calm. At the other end, it could be volatile because of climate impacts, lots of people displaced, at war, etc. If you look at those two ends of the spectrum, the market incentives for large scale industry versus small scale industry are quite different.

And in a world where there is more contestation and less reliance on global trade, having small-scale, disaggregated mixed farming landscapes, or mixed farms growing a diversity of goods, becomes much



more attractive in terms of resilience and national security. So as the world changes over the next decades, some things may become easier to imagine than other things – good and bad, large scale and small scale.

But part of the issue is showing that the constituency of people – whether stakeholders such as farmers or citizens as consumers of food – are willing to accept change and want to help move in the right direction, rather than saying no, we won't accept any change at all.

What about taking action at subnational level?

When Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement, there was quite a lot of despair about the world going backwards. And actually what happened is that many state governments and city governments drove the agenda ahead.

I was speaking in Bradford the other day about food system transformation with a Bradford City Food strategy. This sort of action creates a sense of what is possible, what is doable. It links citizens into a governance regime that can talk to central government and drive politics in new ways. So there is a really important role for citizens for civil society organisations and for sub national governments in general, to create this movement with national governments.

How can we agree on a shared goal or target for what our food system might look like in the future?

I was at a meeting at COP27 and there were about 40 people in the room. And the chair stood up and said, “Everybody agrees that food system transformation is important, and we have to do it. But I bet if I asked every one of you, we would have a different vision for what a transformed food system would look like.”

And that is still the case – for some people, a transformed food system is super intensive, super efficient, sustainable intensification with a fence around nature and lots of tree planting in other places, and a bit of rewilding on abandoned land.

And for other people, a transformed food system is one where we reduce pressure on land by changing our diets, which allows farming to be much more agro-ecological, and where there is circularity in



farming systems and livestock mixed with arable for nutrient recycling purposes. And because those sorts of farming systems probably can't produce as much food, we have to have a low waste system, eat less and be less land intensive with fewer chemical intensive foodstuffs.

So where you sit very much depends on the assumptions that you make about what will be the incentives for these different models. The sustainable intensification view, is very much driven by notions that demand is going to go up because there are more people on the planet. And if there is demand, then it's the job of agricultural markets to supply it.

The agro-ecological and dietary change scenario takes a more people-centred view, asking how can we provide healthy diets for everybody, in a way that's affordable, reduces climate anxiety, protects biodiversity so we don't get more pandemics emerging, and so on. Those sorts of assumptions are not so orientated around economic growth, but more around wellbeing. So different people don't agree, and that's part of the politics of this space.

How we get alternative economic models and alternative food systems discussed at COP? Secondly, given the lack of political will that you're talking about, is there a case to be made that we shift tactics and move towards working within the system that we have?

I used to think that, about working within the existing system. Meaning that it is standard economics that supply and demand will eventually equilibrate, so if only we produced enough food from within the system, we would reach the point where everybody's got enough food, and therefore there wouldn't be incentives to grow more food and further intensify.

What I've learned in the last few years, is that the food system is the Jevons Paradox writ large: That the more we intensify, the more we produce, and the more we produce, the more we find alternative uses for it. And therefore, demand is always going to go up unless we can find a way of constraining demand to what is sustainable to supply.

For example, across Europe over 60% of grains go into livestock feed because it's cheap enough to feed grains to livestock. This means meat is cheaper, and so we eat more meat. And likewise, it is economically rational for many people to waste food, because it is cheap. So the cheaper that food becomes, the more we waste food, and that increases demand.



So somehow, if we are going to tackle these challenges, we have to recognise that there is a finite amount of land. And if we are going to reduce emissions, we can't continue to rely on ever increasing supply growth, because it won't get us to the point that we need it to in the next decades.

Wouldn't resolving the food waste issue go a long way to helping us sort out the problems with the global food system?

I first worried about this in 2015 at a G20 meeting. There were a bunch of countries in the room and I said; "if we waved our magic wand and reduced the 20-30% of food that's wasted annually, what would you tell your farmers?". And every country said "we would tell our farmers to find another market for that food".

So that's the kind of Jevons Paradox, that if we reduced our food waste it would go into biofuel, or it would be biopharmaceuticals or it would be bioplastic or it would be something else. So the market for that produce will still continue to grow. So it's changing one cog in the super system that is the food system, but it's not going to change the system as a whole.

What would you consider the minimum outcome from COP28 that would make you feel that we're going in the right direction?

Realistically, UAE is an odd presidency. It's an oil state with significant plans to expand its fossil fuel extraction over the next decades. And so there is a risk that it's seen as a green-washing COP, and therefore things look really bad.

However, the Global Stocktake is quite frightening. And if there is a renewed vigour, for saying, "Yes, we will attack our NDCs with ambition", and not the middle ground as countries like the UK take, which is to say "we're kind of hoping to get to 2050 net zero, but we can't do anything very much at the moment".

So the former would give me hope. But the middle ground and the green washing would make me somewhat more despairing, and I'll need an extra bottle of whiskey at Christmas time!



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This webinar was part of a series run by AFN Network+ where we explore net zero in the UK agri-food system with leading movers and shakers. Expect deep and varied insight from across the sector, including farmers, scientists, policy analysts, community leaders, retailers, politicians, businesses and health professionals. [Watch past webinars here.](#)

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