

COP28



Centering food security in the fight to avert climate catastrophe: The UN FAO proposes a Roadmap

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For anyone concerned about climate change, it is that time of year again: tens of thousands of people are descending on Dubai for the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Last year, it felt new to see agriculture and food issues so central on the agenda. This year, host country United Arab Emirates has ramped up the issue still further.

On Friday, December 1, the Emirates Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems and Climate Action will be launched, complete with an acknowledgment of the right to food and strong language on livelihoods, adaptive capacity, biodiversity and resilience — albeit without any baselines, targets or committed funding. Later in the proceedings, on December 10, a Food Day is planned. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) will launch a “Roadmap to achieve SDG2 and the 1.5°C goal through agrifood systems transformation.

The Roadmap is a first iteration in a three-year process to help governments determine policies that will protect their commitment to [SDG 2](#) while keeping

emissions at or below the level needed to avoid more than a 1.5°C average global temperature rise. SDG 2 is the second of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the U.N. in 2015 as part of its Agenda 2030. The goal commits governments to ending the most extreme forms of hunger, improving nutrition, protecting small-scale producer livelihoods and reducing the environmental externalities generated by food and agriculture systems.

Food and agriculture play a complex and somewhat confusing role in climate debates and policies. First, agriculture is a [big contributor](#) to emissions. This is fundamental yet often unacknowledged by both governments and agri-food industries. Second, agriculture has become the target of myriad offset and carbon removal schemes, despite widespread criticism from scientists, farmer organizations, civil society organizations like IATP and others. These proposals, whether to pay farmers to sequester carbon in their soil so polluting industries can keep emitting GHGs, or to create incentives for the polluting byproducts of concentrated feedlots, such as biogas, are a distraction from real emissions reductions.



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In this context, the FAO Roadmap promises three crucial things.

1.) It places food security and nutrition as the central objective. It is an objective all governments can get behind — food security is non-negotiable for governments seeking political stability. Crucially, the Roadmap defines food security comprehensively, using the [SDG 2 definition](#), instead of falling back on the arbitrary and simplistic measure of a fixed number of calories per capita, which dominated food security discourse for decades.

2.) The authors insist that agriculture and food systems must reduce their GHG emissions, challenging the false dichotomy introduced by industry groups and some governments, who suggest that current levels of GHG emissions from agriculture are necessary to food security, rather than a threat. The authors of the Roadmap also promise to address inequalities, leading to proposals that avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to instead emphasise a redistribution of where and when GHG emissions linked to food systems should best occur. The idea is that poorer countries need space in any eventual “budget” for GHG emissions to increase their production of certain foods, albeit in less GHG-intensive systems than now dominate, while richer countries should make real cuts to the extensive pollution associated with their concentrated production systems and high levels of over-consumption of some foods.

3.) The report takes a “portfolio” approach to interventions. (Note this approach is central to agroecology, though the Roadmap is not expected to use the language of agroecology.) In this regard, central concepts include the following: 1) **Context** — the policy mix needed in the north of a given country may not suit the south, and the policy mix that addresses shared concerns in Central America is unlikely to make sense in Central Asia; 2) **Synergies** — for example, 25% of agriculture’s emissions are the result of its dependence on fossil fuel derived energy. By cleaning up energy production, agriculture will automatically reduce its climate footprint; and 3) **trade-offs** — to protect food security and nutrition now and into the future, we need not just to avert a climate disaster. We also need clean water, remunerative work, women’s empowerment, genetic diversity, healthy soils, etc. This approach reminds us that we must consider solutions that do many things well, if not any one thing perfectly, bearing in mind how

systems work interactively. A portfolio approach is an important brake on many so-called “climate-smart” technologies, which focus on solving a single problem (typically the need to reduce GHG) with no regard for other necessary outcomes for sustainable food and agriculture systems to thrive.

Of course, the devilish details are yet to be revealed. The glimpses at the Roadmap offered to us so far leave many questions unanswered. This first iteration will set some global targets and outline 10 sectors for intervention, such as crops, livestock, fisheries and energy. But how will the cross-sectoral pressures be addressed? For example, crop subsidies in the U.S. are part of what makes factory farms, or concentrated animal feedlots, profitable. They also undermine biodiversity and public health goals for clean water and soil health, and make no attempt to curb climate hostile practices, such as excessive use of nitrogen fertilizers.

Whatever the detail, the Roadmap offers a much-needed space for fundamental debates on the survival of humanity in the face of the mounting climate challenges. The UNFCCC’s negotiating agenda on food and agriculture has been woefully weak, cut off from the active and engaged food governance spaces at the U.N. Meanwhile, absurd headlines have emerged ahead of the Roadmap’s launch, revealing none-too-subtle U.S. meat company lobbyists trying to rile Americans against purported U.N. attempts to “take away our meat.” It would be laughable if they were not speaking for multi-billion-dollar industries working closely with fossil fuel companies to lock in highly exploitative, extractive and emitting models of agriculture. Will the Roadmap offer a way out? Here is hoping so. Either way, we are ready for the chance to have the debate on the terms set: realize SDG 2 while meeting the 1.5°C target.