

## Getting change for climate action into food systems should start with the UN

Whereas attendance is growing with each new international climate event, this has hardly contributed to more being done to combat climate change. Our author argues that instead of spending millions on raising false hopes, the UN climate change process itself should undergo reforms aimed at genuine results.

Earlier this month, thousands of people travelled to Bonn for the UN's Bonn Climate Change Conference. It aimed to set the agenda for international negotiations at COP 29 in Azerbaijan in November and featured a flurry of side events, meetings and discussions. I'm told that over 10,000 people sought accreditation this year – far more than last year and far beyond the capacity of Bonn's World Conference Center. This is in keeping with ballooning attendance at such events. COP 28 in Dubai last year attracted a record-breaking 83,884 people (with badges). While it's great that so many people are keen to take action on climate change, this begs a more fundamental question: Do these conferences – and the UN negotiations they support – actually achieve anything substantive?

In a recently published peer-reviewed article, my colleagues and I decided to investigate. We tracked the progress of official negotiations on food and agriculture since 2006 – this was when the UN formally acknowledged the need for targeted action in agriculture, which both contributed to climate change and were likely to suffer from it. Surely, 17 years was enough time for some action to have been taken. But no. We found that these conferences have provided little more than false optimism and empty promises. Also worrying was the growing influence of special interest groups in hijacking official agendas. While we observed numerous steps in the process, like decisions, workshops, views of countries and organisations being submitted, and announcements, we haven't observed results. Little action was taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture and enhance farmers' resilience. Meanwhile, emissions from agri-food systems continued to rise, and increasing temperatures also posed significant challenges to food production.

We concluded that the process had taken over the purpose of the negotiations. Each year, we go through the motions of one conference after another, while actual progress on the issues these conferences were established to tackle has somehow been forgotten. We concluded

that the UN climate change process had failed – at least in relation to food and agriculture.

The UN Bonn Climate Change Conference this year marked the 60<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Subsidiary Bodies of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which includes the implementation body (SBI) and the scientific and technological body (SBSTA). During the conference, formal negotiations on agriculture continued under the Sharm el-Sheikh joint work on implementation of climate action on agriculture and food security, which was established at COP 27. These negotiations concluded by agreeing on a work plan for this process. While settling for agreeing on a work plan after 18 months of stalemate might be considered a big win by some, my view is the contrary. The work plan essentially includes workshops, submissions and an online portal – how will these lead to real-world action? Such mechanisms have been tried again and again over the past 17 years, but they haven't resulted in real-world impact.

Meanwhile, outside the official negotiations, the COP 29 Presidency of Azerbaijan and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations showcased a new “special” initiative. Titled *Harmoniya*, it seeks to harmonise existing initiatives relating to agriculture; increase investments in climate action in agriculture; and support climate-resilient villages and communities. While these aims are commendable, if history and evidence is to be believed, this initiative will also be launched to much fanfare, applause and media attention, and forgotten soon afterwards. So while Bonn might signal progress in terms of climate diplomacy, my view is that we are investing in a failed process, which will continue to disappoint us.

This is a continuing source of anxiety for my colleagues and me, who have spent most of our professional lives working in agriculture and food systems. We've been involved in numerous scientific studies on climate change, and each year, we fail to see the very compelling



**Dhanush Dinesh** is the Chief Climate Catalyst of Clim-Eat, a think and do tank for food and climate which he founded at COP 26.

results reflected in any tangible action taken via UN negotiations. That's why I believe continuing to invest time, money and hope in the UN's climate change process is a wasted effort. Instead, we should be calling for significant reforms. Based on our findings, we suggest:

- The UN focuses on measuring results and the impact delivered from climate change negotiations. Specifically, the UNFCCC – the agency that convenes negotiations – needs to stop acting as a “mega-meeting” organiser and become a watchdog that ensures action by state and non-state actors.
- The annual climate change COPs should be made leaner. In a world starved of climate finance, spending hundreds of millions of euros on meetings each year is unacceptable. Germany and the UK spent over 100 million euros and 300 million euros for COP 23 and COP 26, respectively. We suggest that the COPs be scaled down to receive fewer participants and organised every two years instead. They should focus on working meetings that deliver results instead of being de facto trade fairs that give false optimism to the wider public.
- Transparency on the costs, participation and emissions of the COPs themselves is needed to ensure that the UN is more accountable to the public. This is also crucial to protecting the UN process from the influence of host countries' priorities, lobbyists and private consultancies.

With just a few more months to go to COP 29 in Azerbaijan, it is important to learn from the failures of the past, and truly rethink and reform the process for systemic change for climate action in food systems. More of the same unfortunately will not deliver different results.