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COP26: Sustaining the Global Food System

By Paul Teng

SYNOPSIS

COP26 has reinforced much of what is already known about the impact of climate change on food production. But few concrete steps are emerging from COP26 that can improve the livelihoods of producers of the bulk of the world's food.

COMMENTARY

CLIMATE CHANGE clearly affects food production. This in turn contributes at least a third of the greenhouse gas emissions causing climate change. Efforts to keep temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius – the new “safe” upper-limit for global warming – are expected at best to give mixed results from climate mitigation action.

World population is anticipated to reach about 10 billion by 2050 accompanied by increased demand for food. Climate change action needs to strongly address the sustainability of food production systems. This must include the livelihoods of millions of small-scale farmers and animal herders who depend on these systems.

Sustaining Food Production and Farmer Livelihoods

Yet COP26 – the UN Climate Change Conference which ends this Friday (12 Nov 2021) – has so far provided little evidence that countries, whether acting individually or together, have the will to formulate concrete and meaningful action. Even more so, to provide financial support for small-scale farmers in developing countries, estimated at half a billion strong, to take action.

Climate activist Greta Thunberg was quoted as saying in Glasgow that much of the discourse at COP26 amounts to “hypocrisy” where action does not match intentions,

or needs. And the thousands of young demonstrators in the streets outside COP26 seem to agree with her.

Sustainability discourse in the context of climate change must not only be about the environmental, social and governance (ESG) aspects but also include an economic (livelihood) consideration. The sustainable agriculture movement of the 1980s used a set of rubrics based on “EES” (Environment, Economic and Social); it had non-government entities such as the International Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture as strong advocates.

The distinction between “EES” and “ESG” is particularly important for the world’s small-scale farmers and animal herders in the Asian-African regions who are responsible for most of the world’s food production. The economic (E) rubric recognises that small-scale farmers need to have decent livelihoods, without which they cannot sustain their farming and their families.

Climate action has therefore to take into account economic aspects of small-scale farming. It needs to reflect the voices of about 500 million smallholder farmers which are often missing or poorly represented at global meetings.

Wicked Problem: Food Production and Climate Change

Climate change action has the features of a “Wicked Problem” when the issues of climate change, sustainable agriculture and farmer livelihoods are considered together, which must be the case. Can a wicked problem be unpacked into parts which can be addressed separately and, in their solution, contribute to the overall solution?

Pragmatically, this may be the only approach. Agriculture contributes to climate change and climate change affects agriculture. The “whole is more than the sum of its parts”, and food production is only one component of food systems. The UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) views food systems as comprising “the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities”.

This involves “the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products that originate from agriculture, forestry or fisheries, and parts of the broader economic, societal and natural environments in which they are embedded”.

So the hope for humankind may be to unpack a big wicked problem associated with climate change into its components. Then follow this up by solving the component issues through cooperative efforts. This is in the hope that they may lead at least to a partial solution of the bigger wicked problem.

The Net-Zero Challenge

Agriculture is the second biggest contributor to global greenhouse gasses, but it is an activity that we cannot live without. COP26 has given much attention to agriculture-induced deforestation which severely unbalances the carbon equation. Attempts to reduce deforestation only tackle part of the problem if the needs of small-scale farmers

are not part of the solution, and if technology is not used to produce more from existing farmland.

But there is a gap between actual livelihoods and practices at the farming community level and high-level pronouncements of policies and aspirations in international forums. How do we also ensure that the livelihoods of small-scale farmers in sustainable agriculture are not jeopardised by climate change action? These are but a sample of the questions associated with attempts to balance out the carbon equation in farming – the “net-zero” solution.

There is general agreement that global food demand will increase by at least 50 per cent by 2050. This demand has to be met in the face of the key challenge of climate change and with reduced capacity to grow food because of declining land and freshwater resources, and with declining (ageing) farmer numbers.

Concurrently, the call for sustainable farming has gotten louder, especially as we approach the 2030 deadline to achieve the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Increased sustainability, however, can only be achieved by intensifying research; adopting new farming approaches; technologies that contribute to a circular economy; and game-changing policies – all backed by political will.

Ultimately, there can be no sustainable development without addressing the inter-linked issues of climate change, livelihoods and food production.

The Greenwashing Phenomenon

Large corporations, much more than small enterprises or small-scale farmers and herders, have the means to report their achievements for meeting sustainability goals with climate action. In an earlier [RSIS Commentary](#) I had warned about the “Greenwashing” phenomenon to establish corporate credentials in sustainability, especially under the umbrella of abeyance with the “ESG” (Environment, Economics, Governance) rubrics.

In the COP26 talks, climate activists have rightly highlighted that some corporations have used the governance (G) rubric to support their sustainability and climate credentials, and be seen as responsible citizens.

But to protect agricultural ecosystems and reduce deforestation will require corporations and governments to explicitly factor in the interests of the half billion small-scale farmers and herders in developing countries.

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