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## **Agriculture and Food at COP28: Not Just More Money**

*By Jose M. L. Montesclaros and Paul S. Teng*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The recent COP28 Climate Summit has finally given due recognition to food and agriculture given the close links between climate change and food production. While the summit saw a big push to operationalise the newly established Loss and Damage Fund, limited attention was given to agriculture in discussions on the said fund. Rather than focusing on drawing from the new fund to promote sustainable and climate-resilient agricultural practices, greater attention is needed instead to mobilising existing funds.*

### **COMMENTARY**

For the first time, food and agricultural systems transformation was allocated an entire day at the 28th United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), also known as COP28, held in December 2023. The day concluded with the "[COP28 UAE Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems, and Climate Action](#)" signed by over 154 countries, in order to "expedite the integration of agriculture and food systems into our climate action".

Food and agriculture also figured in the first [Global Stocktake](#) (GST) on progress in climate change mitigation and adaptation since the 2015 Paris Agreement of COP21. The GST recognised "the fundamental priority of safeguarding food security and ending hunger, and the particular vulnerabilities of food production systems to the

adverse impacts of climate change”, which aligned with the Paris Agreement. The GST also emphasised the dual roles of climate-resilient food systems, in both achieving “equitable access to adequate food and nutrition for all”, while reducing emissions through “sustainable and regenerative (food) production”.

### **The Loss and Damage Fund: Whither Agriculture?**

One of the key take-off points of COP28 was the Loss and Damage (L&D) fund. The [UNFCCC](#) recognised that developing countries are “particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change”, especially small island states with lower income levels. The L&D fund aspires to provide assistance “in responding to economic and non-economic loss and damage associated with the adverse effects of climate change, including extreme weather events and slow onset events”.

The creation of this fund was previously agreed in the final hours of the preceding COP27 conference held in Egypt in 2022, but COP28 carried this forward by passing the agreement on [how the fund would be operationalised](#). Pledges from developed countries of [US\\$700 million](#) have already been made since the launch.

One contention though was whether agriculture should have been given more emphasis in discussions on the uses of the L&D fund. The Director-General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (UN FAO) unveiled a new [report](#) on the first day of COP28, which highlighted the “escalating threat of climate change-induced loss and damage to agrifood systems”.

Agricultural climate vulnerabilities are key drivers of climate-induced L&D. Countries biennially published their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) reports, which represent their climate change mitigation/adaptation commitments. According to the UN FAO report, while only 35 per cent of NDCs explicitly used the term “L&D”, all of them cited agriculture as the primary driver of climate-induced L&D.

Food security is likewise crucial to climate-resilient development, owing to significant shares of agricultural jobs especially in developing countries. Agriculture is increasingly vulnerable to the decline of conducive food-growing environments, as well as the increasing competition over scarce land and water resources.

However, the FAO [reported](#) that “Despite (agriculture’s) central role in global agrifood systems – encompassing production, distribution and consumption – (it) has not been a primary focus in discussions surrounding L&D”. The FAO has thus pushed for greater inclusion and consideration of agriculture in the future disbursements of the L&D fund.

## **Create New Fund or Rationalise Existing Ones?**

The bigger question though is whether a new fund would actually make a bigger impact in promoting resilient and sustainable agricultural systems, than focusing on ensuring that existing funding is used effectively and expeditiously. One viewpoint from sub-Saharan Africa, where the 10 most exposed/vulnerable countries to climate change L&D lie, is that earlier commitments of US\$50 billion dollars annually during COP21 in Paris, have reportedly not reached the “[frontlines](#)”.

This has partly to do with “aid fragmentation” in that while over 62 green-climate multilateral funds have been created to aid developing countries since 1991, the actual funding has “not added up”, based on a [study](#) published by *Agence Française de Développement* (AFD). It cited the Climate Policy Initiative’s report which showed that in 2019-20, only US\$4 billion (5.8 per cent) was disbursed out of the US\$68 billion annual multilateral development financing institutions’ climate funds. The UNFCCC’s Finance Committee also reported that only US\$3.1 billion (8 per cent) was disbursed out of the pool of US\$38.3 billion multilateral development bank annual climate funds.

The AFD concluded that while the creation of new funds “may have been justified at the time of (their) creation”, there has been more emphasis on starting new funding initiatives rather than rationalising existing ones. The same could apply to the L&D fund.

## **Way Forward: Finding Opportunities for Effective Climate Action**

Despite the potential of the L&D fund to support agriculture-dependent developing countries, it would be myopic for agriculture stakeholders to focus on drawing from the said fund. Given the problem of aid fragmentation, they should instead focus on identifying viable models for promoting sustainable and climate-resilient agriculture which can be scaled up.

Similarly, the landmark COP28 UAE Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems, and Climate Action is a move in the right direction, committing the 154 countries to regional and global collaboration to find solutions. The real test will come if these commitments are translated into concrete action in the coming year at COP29. And a reality check for Asia-Pacific and Africa is whether any significant proportion of the smallholder farmers who dominate the farming scene in these regions derive measurable benefit.

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