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Headline: COP27 as turning point for food systems

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Tokyo—Decades of progress on reducing food insecurity are being reversed. In Africa alone, 310 million people are projected to be chronically hungry by 2030 if urgent action is not taken. Worse, a host of factors threatens to push the world's food systems toward collapse. Dangerous climate tipping points are approaching faster than predicted, and tens of millions of people are suffering from a cost-of-living crisis, ongoing global conflicts, biodiversity loss, and the continuing effects of COVID-19.

There is still time to put the global food system on a fairer, more sustainable, and more resilient path, but the window is closing quickly. Fortunately, the Egyptian government has placed food and nutrition center stage at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Sharm El-Sheikh, which means the issue will get more attention than it has received at any previous Conference of Parties.

Agriculture alone is responsible for about one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions and is the primary driver of biodiversity loss. It is also linked to 92 percent of the global water footprint, because the sector is the largest user and polluter of freshwater. Perversely, even as the number of people facing acute food insecurity rises, one-third of all food produced globally is either lost or wasted.

Discussions about the nexus of food systems and climate at COP27 should focus on four priority areas. The first is political leadership. On Nov. 7 and 8, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi convened heads of state and government to discuss the global food security crisis and the world's response to it. Political, business, and philanthropic leaders thus had a rare opportunity to come forward with major commitments and clear roadmaps for reforming food systems, emphasizing not only financing but also support for smallholder farmers, and the adoption of digital technologies in agriculture.

The second priority is to close the significant and unjust global climate financing gap, which reflects a failure by many countries in the Global North to meet their past commitments. African countries have rightly called for a major increase in financing for climate adaptation. Only 3 percent of current global climate finance is targeted at agriculture and land use. Far more is needed to ensure sustainable food production that would benefit billions of people, as well as the climate and other species.

Smallholder farmers are especially in need of support. Under 2 percent of climate finance makes it to this cohort, even though it produces almost one-third of the world's food and works one-quarter of the world's agricultural land. Developing a better food system requires political, private sector, and philanthropic leadership at scale to help smallholder farmers adopt more climate-resilient agricultural practices.

A third area of focus should be national commitments and their implementation. A year ago, the Glasgow Climate Pact called on all countries to revisit their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and strengthen their emissions reduction targets for this critical decade. With only a few having done so, however, there is a risk of further drift and delay.

Moreover, while many NDCs do refer to food and land use, only a few countries—such as Colombia and the United Arab Emirates—have actively committed to sectoral targets and concrete action. All countries will need to strengthen their work on the “practicalities of implementation” by supporting locally driven strategies and integrating NDC commitments into national planning and budget frameworks.

The fourth priority area is private sector and civil society activity, which is no less important than policymaking and investments by national governments. Businesses should be adopting science-based targets to deliver on their climate commitments and protect their own economic future. This is especially true of the world’s commodity and trading companies, lest they end up backpedaling from their sustainability commitments, among them to reduce deforestation.

Regions and cities can also adopt ambitious food system plans, and local communities can do remarkable work from the ground up—whether by reducing food loss and waste, pursuing landscape restoration, or securing alternatives to charcoal. The world’s major philanthropies can and must also dramatically increase their funding for food systems.

Our hope is that all these players will come together this month to launch a collective movement for food system change—which is crucial to both the Paris climate agreement targets and the UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. Egypt could be a turning point for food and the climate. Leaders from all sectors have a collective responsibility to make it so.

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