



## **Response to the UK COP26 Presidency's announcement to support sustainable food & agricultural systems**

**November 6, 2021**

IPES-Food welcomes the COP26 Presidency's formal acknowledgement of 'food systems' as a major contributor to climate change and a key part of the solution – but this will depend on the degree to which they can be transformed.

Firstly, it is worrying that the statement made by the COP26 Presidency **recycles many of the pledges coming out of the flawed UN Food Systems Summit** that took place shortly before COP26. These pledges, and the solutions they represent, were rejected less than two months ago by hundreds of farmers, fishers, indigenous communities, workers unions, researchers, and civil society groups who boycotted the Summit, including La Via Campesina, the world's largest coalition of small- and medium-scale farmers and peasants. In particular, the farmers' platform mentioned in these commitments is largely led by agribusinesses, corporations and select farmers' organizations whose "net-zero", "nature-based", or "nature positive innovations" stray little from business as usual.

Secondly, it is concerning that most of the funding is focused on productivist approaches, notably support for supposed miracle crops and livestock breeds. This risks diverting funding and attention away from the real transformation we need. Billions of dollars have already been invested in genetically modifying crops and livestock to make them 'climate-resilient', but these solutions have not been delivered. **It is farming systems, not crops and livestock breeds, that need to be made climate-resilient.** As we've seen in the wake of natural disasters, diversified production systems bring resilience, and monocultures do not.

As stated in the **recent report** by the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), 87% of the \$540 billion of global farm subsidies is either price distorting and/or supports practices that are harmful to nature and health. **Government support can no longer keep propping up elements of industrial food systems that have continuously failed to deliver sustainability.** Instead, public sector investment and agricultural research funding must go to truly sustainable and climate-resilient solutions.

**Agroecology is a low-cost, low-risk solution to get to sustainable food systems** but is not explicitly mentioned in the COP Presidency commitments. Earlier this year, over **1,200 international organisations, farming groups and food experts** stressed the need to place agroecology, organic and regenerative agriculture at the top of the international agenda (see also, [Call to action](#)). Subsequently, **27 countries recognized agroecology** as the key food system reform pathway under a recently created Agroecology Coalition. Agroecology was also recognized by the Green Climate Fund, established within the framework of the UNFCCC, as one of three paradigm shifts to achieve resilient and low-emission agriculture – and with further targeting, the GCF could be a major leverage for shifting financial flows to sustainable food systems.<sup>1</sup>

And while agroecological systems may be low-cost when they are fully operational, the transition from industrial to agroecological food systems will require significant financial and infrastructure investment. In stark contrast to the billions of dollars now being committed to business-as-usual solutions, government support to agroecology remains extremely low:

- Countries like the UK and the US are spending large portions of their agricultural research funding or aid on projects focusing on increasing input use and crop improvement, but are not funding projects with a specific focus on agroecology. **Less than 5%** of the UK's agriculture budget has been spent on programmes with agroecological approaches such as reduced inputs or recycling.
- In the US, projects with an emphasis on agroecology represented only **0.6–1.5%** of the USDA Research, Extension, and Economics (REE) budget in 2014.
- CGIAR research programs have historically contributed little to holistic food system transformation, and mostly focus on breeding and on seeking to improve the cost-efficiency of production systems. The CGIAR is currently being reformed under the influence of powerful donors including the Gates Foundation, which only dedicates **3% of its agricultural research funding in Africa** to agroecology.
- **Only a handful of donors** — including France, Switzerland, Germany, the FAO and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) — have explicitly recognized agroecology as a key solution for building sustainable food systems.

Thirdly, the COP Presidency statement presents technological development and 'innovation' in a one-dimensional way, but not all technologies bring us closer to the low-carbon, biodiverse, and

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<sup>1</sup> The Green Climate Fund states that “a transformation towards resilient and low-emission agriculture and food systems can be achieved through three paradigm-shifting and interlinked investment pathways: 1) Promoting resilient agroecology; 2) Facilitating climate informed advisory and risk management services; and 3) Reconfiguring food systems.”

sustainable farming systems we require. The **experiential knowledge of food systems practitioners** should be combined with the knowledge of scientists in order to identify the solutions that work and are best adapted to local conditions. Agroecology is rife with innovations to build dynamic, living food systems to suit a variety of contexts. An assessment of different paradigms and solutions will be crucial to food systems sustainability, as well as **assessments that go beyond singular metrics and indicators** (e.g., carbon, productivity).

Fourthly, we welcome the Presidency's reference to a "*Just Rural Transition*" and the acknowledgement of the participation and involvement of a diversity of farmers and communities in policy development and implementation. However, historically the voices of proponents of high-tech, high-cost 'green revolution' approaches have been heard the most. To avoid repeating these problems, smallholder farmers, fishers, pastoralists, indigenous communities, and other groups that have been marginalized from decision-making processes will need to play a leading role not just in policy-making but also in science and knowledge creation. **The lack of acknowledgement of agroecology, food sovereignty, and rights-based approaches** in the COP Presidency's programme to help countries in the global South move towards "more sustainable methods of agriculture and food production" is therefore worrisome.

One of the most important ways that the UK Presidency might lead instead is in **the advocacy of debt cancellation and reparation**, as it is no surprise that the need to repay (illegitimate) debt has long been driving over-reliance on export crop production in the global South. Rather than develop supply chains through which forests might be plundered 'sustainably', the UK and its partners might remove the fiscal pressure to repay debts in the first place.

Relatedly, **greater focus on the rights of indigenous communities** and their ability to protect their lands and resources is needed in addressing the decline of biodiversity and deforestation. The knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples, small- and medium-scale farmers, women farmers, and livestock keepers are crucial to conserving biodiversity and sustainably working with nature. Large scale forest protection and tree-planting initiatives risk dispossessing local people of rights and livelihoods, and undermining already sustainable practices, unless it is undertaken in genuine consultation with local land users.

Lastly, **ensuring a steady flow of investment into agricultural research remains paramount. But it is crucial to rethink how, to whom and to what types of projects these funds are allocated.** The huge potential of systemic, agroecological research for development has barely been tapped.