

Info Note

The evolving role of agriculture in climate change negotiations: Progress and players

Findings from a study on progress regarding agriculture as a discussion item in climate change negotiations

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Key messages

- Positions among states differ substantially not only between Annex-I and non-Annex I countries but also among non-Annex I countries themselves.
- The institutional overlap between agriculture, trade and climate change together with the normative character of agriculture, have been significant factors in slowing down the negotiating progress so far.
- Non-state actors are considered crucial in facilitating negotiations particularly because of their expertise, knowledge and capacity building.
- Currently, the potential of agriculture to further develop as a negotiating item lies within the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA).

This Info Note summarizes the findings of a study, coordinated by the Earth System Governance Foundation, on the substantive and discursive progress regarding agriculture as a discussion item in climate change negotiations from the establishment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992 until the 20th Conference of the Parties in Lima in December 2014.

The crucial role of agriculture in food security and climate change

The need to secure food production while striving for a safe and stable climate in a world that is experiencing strikingly different conditions is pivotal. This need is recognized in article 2 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). However, agriculture has not had a very prominent role in any of the agreements emerging from the climate negotiations. While some progress has been made recently, this has been painfully slow. This despite the crucial importance of

agriculture which provides food for all and offers livelihood for 36% of total world's workforce, yet faces enormous challenges in light of population growth and land use.

Agriculture, however, has serious climate change implications. In 2005, it accounted for 10-12% of total global anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Notably, four out of the five regions responsible for 75% of total agricultural emissions consisted mostly of non-Annex I countries. These regions were South Asia, East Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa and OECD North America (consisting of Canada, USA and Mexico). Simultaneously, these are the regions where most of the food production is expected to take place in the future and where most of the mitigation potential of the sector lies. At the same time many countries in these regions face the largest adaptation challenges.

Agriculture in the UNFCCC negotiations

THE CONVENTION

The role of agriculture in the context of climate change is mentioned explicitly in the provisions of the UNFCCC, both in relation to mitigation and adaptation. Food production is mentioned as one of the three criteria that shall guide the interpretation of the ultimate objective of the convention. Specifically, the convention provides that the stabilization of GHG concentrations in the atmosphere should be achieved in a timeframe that "ensure[s] that food production is not threatened" (UNFCCC article 2). Additionally, agriculture is listed among the sectors falling within the obligation of parties to develop mitigation plans and measures (UNFCCC Article 4.1(c)).

THE KYOTO PROTOCOL

The Kyoto Protocol adopted in 1997 refers to the importance to “promote sustainable agriculture in light of climate change considerations” (Kyoto Protocol, article 2). Therefore the protocol reiterated the commitment for all parties to adopt sectoral mitigation policies and measures, including in relation to the agriculture sector (article 10). Following the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol, several additional references were made to the issues of agriculture and food security in thematic COP decision.

FROM COPENHAGEN TO DURBAN

Resulting from the 2007 Bali Action Plan a draft decision was prepared at the 2009 COP15 in Copenhagen in relation to agriculture in mitigation. In addition, a work program on agriculture under the Subsidiary for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) was proposed. However, the draft remained controversial because of issues such as a link to the trade implications of agriculture specific measures and the fact that the agriculture negotiations were bundled with the more controversial issue of bunker fuels. These controversies plus the breakdown of the negotiations at the Copenhagen COP15 led to a neither finalized nor adopted decision. At the following Cancun COP16, still no decision could be adopted on the issue and therefore remained on the agenda up to the 2011 Durban COP17. Little progress could be secured this time resulting in a proposal by the COP presidency mandating SBSTA “to consider issues related to agriculture” for COP18.

SBSTA, THE DURBAN LEGACY, AND NATIONAL STRATEGIES

Since the Durban negotiations the issue of agriculture is included as a separate item on the formal agenda of one of the bodies established under the UNFCCC. SBSTA was requested to consider this issue focusing on the technical aspects. In June 2013 progress was made calling for the submission of views by parties; the preparation of a compilation report; and the mandate for the organization to hold a workshop dedicated to agriculture focused on adaptation, sustainable development and food security during COP19 in Warsaw. As the competence of SBSTA relates to technical and scientific aspects of climate policies, housing these discussions under this body was expected to depoliticize the issue. However, the issue remains political and controversial and no consensus could be reached in Warsaw (2013) to initiate substantive discussions. Though, in June 2014 SBSTA negotiations led to a set of activities for the following two years. In addition, and despite the fact that the adaptation regime under the UNFCCC has not yet addressed the agriculture sector in a structured manner, activities undertaken by countries under this framework have nevertheless featured

agriculture related actions and the integration of the agricultural sector in national climate policies.

NEGOTIATIONS TOWARDS THE PARIS AGREEMENT

While SBSTA has initiated an exchange of views among parties on this issue, political aspects of the climate negotiations have, since 2012, been addressed under the Ad hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (ADP) structured along two workstreams: the first related to the preparation of a new comprehensive climate agreement to be adopted by the end of 2015, and the second dedicated to raising short-term mitigation ambition. The negotiations towards this new climate agreement rely on a new approach emphasizing national pledges (Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs)). The scope of these contributions differs widely among countries and constitutes a shift away from sectoral approaches negotiated at the global level. This shift towards national pledges and voluntary commitments as terms of debate instead of sectoral approaches agreed upon by all parties, confirms the recurring contestation around this issue. At the same time it provides the opportunity to make progress at the national level taking into account the needs and vulnerabilities of specific contexts.

Study method

To get insight in regard to agriculture as a discussion item in the climate change negotiations and the progress or lack thereof, this study differentiates between:

- Discursive progress - the framing of the issue in the negotiations.
- Substantive progress - the place of agriculture as an agenda item in the negotiations.

In order to understand what contributes to these forms of progress (or lack thereof) three sets of explanatory variables are used:

- Positions of key states
- The particularities of agriculture as a political issue
- Strategies of non-state actors

The analysis is based on an extensive analysis of the scientific literature and policy documents as well as 16 interviews with key negotiators via telephone and skype and face-to-face at the COP 20/CMP 10 in Lima Peru, in December 2014. The interviews were crucial given that much of the relevant information on factors shaping this process is not available publicly, and that they provided information on the current positions of various actors in these negotiations. All the actors interviewed have been actively engaged in the negotiations related to agriculture under the UNFCCC and can be classified in four main groups:

- Annex-I countries (4 interviews)
- Non-Annex I countries (2 interviews)
- International organizations and global partnerships (including CGIAR) (6 interviews)
- Non-governmental organizations and stakeholder groups (4 interviews)

Exploring explanations

POSITIONS OF KEY STATES

Annex-I countries spearheaded proposals to consider the inclusion of the agricultural sector in discussions related to mitigation. The view of these countries is relatively homogeneous but differs from the position of the non-Annex I countries. Strong divergences also exist among the positions supported by various non-Annex I countries. These differences are due to the divergent interests and struggles that these countries face in regard to agriculture, trade, climate change impacts and food security.

THE PARTICULARITIES OF AGRICULTURE AS A POLITICAL ISSUE

The different positions among the states are not surprising looking at the wider context and characteristics of agriculture and climate change. To mention some, future challenges for food security and losses of (potential) agricultural land resulting from climate change are highest in the African countries, while there is a potential to gain agricultural land for North America and Russia. Another challenge lies in the historical contributions to CO₂ emissions, current development needs and circumstances and capacities for adaptation and mitigation. Besides, the agricultural sector and mitigation strategies have to deal with normative conflicts about land sovereignty, land use changes, the trade regime and the socio-cultural dimension.

INFLUENCE OF INTERGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

Intergovernmental organizations (IGO's) have to deal with both internal and external constraints, e.g. they cannot take an autonomous political stand in the negotiations. Therefore their main focus is to provide technical expertise. This expertise is important to connect the negotiations to the reality of policy implementation and to deal with the normative and politicized character of the issue at hand. Besides the direct input of IGO's to the negotiation process, they also play a major role outside the process through their support to initiatives such as the Africa Climate-Smart Agriculture Alliance (ACSA) to build capacity of the national administrations of the countries

involved. This leads to greater engagement and knowledge of the different positions in the negotiations and thereby creates opportunities to come to a consensus among all actors involved. However these parallel processes and projects generate suspicion and distrust among the parties as well.

STRATEGIES OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are influential on the negotiation outcomes because of their high level of understanding of the negotiation process. However, by taking strong negative stances on specific issues they can also polarize the discussions. In addition, their influence remains small, also due to the diverse views upon the negotiations among the NGOs themselves. Their positions differ especially on the inclusion of the agricultural sector in mitigation commitments, ranging from those who are supportive to those who reject any inclusion.

Conclusions

This study shows some discursive progress, but little substantive progress of agriculture as a discussion item in climate change negotiations. The little progress is due to divergent positions between Annex-I and Non-Annex, but also among Non-Annex I countries. This heterogeneous stance in the discussion can be explained by the different degrees of vulnerability of these countries' agricultural sectors to climate change, historical contributions to current GHG emissions and the normative character of the issue. Additionally, the overlap between agriculture, trade and climate change slowed down the negotiating process. Non-state actors are considered crucial in facilitating the negotiations through their expertise, knowledge and capacity building. However they are faced with constraints, such as heterogeneous positions and distrust among parties towards parallel processes, such as climate-smart agriculture (CSA). Currently, the potential of agriculture to further develop as a negotiating item lies within SBSTA.

Further reading

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