

## What next for agriculture in the climate change arena?

Written by Albert Norström

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Last month's [UN climate conference in Durban](#) (the COP-17) achieved very little progress in tackling climate change. What came out of the meeting was the pretty hollow ["Durban Platform for Enhanced Action"](#) - a roadmap that commits parties to reach a binding legal framework for reducing greenhouse emissions by 2015. Pushing the problem a few years ahead in time, in essence.

With regards to one of the greatest causes of environmental and climate change - agriculture - the "Enhanced Action" document only agreed to "exchange views on it (agriculture)". A first burning question then is why is agriculture ignored in these climate conferences? A second question is how do we combine the discourses, and attain future security in the face of climate change.

In an [article published last Friday](#) in Science, top agricultural scientists have outlined how the research world can develop the knowledge needed to support inclusion of agriculture and food security in climate change policies, and get agriculture at the top of the climate agenda. The analysis, What Next for Agriculture After Durban?, was co-authored by a group that includes members of the Commission on Sustainable Agriculture and Climate Change, chaired by [Sir John Beddington](#) ; many of the recommendations are informed by the Commission's seven key actions for [Achieving Food Security in the Face of Climate Change](#) released in November.

So then, firstly - why did the Durban climate conference have so little mention of agriculture in its output documents and statements? Well, one argument by some negotiators is that the technical challenges (e.g., carbon monitoring by millions of farmers and pastoralists) are too great to develop agriculture agreements. But probably the most challenging reason is outlined in the Science paper:

*"Actions agreed in Durban were in the mitigation track of FCCC negotiations, which are separate from adaptation discussions. This obscures opportunities for agriculture, which can deliver benefits for both, and has led to concern that the focus on agricultural adaptation—a priority for developing countries—will be reduced. Others worry that inclusion of agriculture*

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*under the mitigation track could lead to mandatory commitments and/or that possible mechanisms (e.g., carbon trading) will not benefit smallholder farmers. Some countries do not welcome potential restrictions on conversion of land to agricultural use. Export-focused agricultural producers worry that mitigation measures for agriculture could restrict trade from "high-emission agriculture."*

Basically there is a fear that including agriculture under the "lets do something to stop climate change"(mitigation) discussions could lead to damaging restrictions for developing countries - i.e restrictions on converting more land to farms and pastures. Not a completely unfounded fear, but one that is clearly putting a spanner in the works.

*"In general, higher-income countries, farmers' organizations, UN and agricultural agencies, and some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) supported a SBSTA work program on agricultural adaptation and mitigation. Other nations, primarily low and middle income, supported by a different set of NGOs, resisted a work program and called for emphasis on agricultural adaptation to climate change."*

We then get to answering the second question - what can we do to get agriculture to the top of the climate change agenda, in light of the obstacles and opportunities highlighted in Durban. The authors of the Science paper suggest several areas for scientific contribution to policy progress under the current rounds of climate negotiations and conference series. They highlight the role for scientists to build agreement on practical definitions of "climate-smart agriculture" and "sustainable intensification" as well as adaptation and mitigation strategies that span agriculture and forestry:

*"Common terms - Terms like "climate-smart agriculture" (CSA) and "sustainable intensification" are widely used in relation to FCCC; however, common understandings of how these terms address adaptation and mitigation is needed. The following elements are essential to defining these terms: maintains or increases production of food, fodder, fiber, and fuel; supports livelihoods and builds prosperity; sustains environmental resources and ecosystems; adapts to existing and future climate; and, sequesters carbon and/or reduces GHG emissions. Through efforts like the CSA source book (15), led by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, scientists can develop objectively grounded "standards" and can address concerns about an unbalanced focus on mitigation.*

*Forestry and agriculture - Although agreements reached at Durban for REDD+ did not explicitly*

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*mention agriculture, it is implicitly recognized as a driver of deforestation. Scientists can more clearly describe adaptation and mitigation strategies that span agriculture and forestry and improve food security and livelihoods."*

Interestingly they use some [Planetary Boundaries](#) concepts with one of the points they make, on safe operating space:

*"Scaling up to "safe operating space." The Commission emphasized that the world is already outside a safe operating space with respect to agriculture, climate change, and food security, as defined by three theoretical limits: the maximum amount of food that can be produced under a given climate; the minimum quantity of food needed by a growing population; and the minimum effects of food production on the climate (see the figure). To mobilize increased investment, scientists must document ways that farmers, industry, consumers, and government can move toward, expand, or shift the safe space and achieve multiple benefits from sustainable farming practices. More integrated research and improved knowledge systems on what works in different regions, farming systems, and landscapes is needed, especially in the most vulnerable socioecological systems."*

Finally, we need money and investments to make change happen:

*"Climate financing. We are already seeing investments in agriculture through the Adaptation Fund of the Kyoto Protocol. There are two other opportunities: the Green Climate Fund (13), which is to invest \$100 billion per year for mitigation and adaptation to climate change in developing countries, and the Clean Development Mechanism (13). For both, we need processes that allow investments in integrated agricultural adaptation and mitigation."*