



About Shefali Sharma

Over the last decade, Shefali's work has focused on international trade and financial institutions, and international food and agriculture policies, with a particular interest and focus on India and South Asia. She has published several reports and articles on the WTO, the Agreement on Agriculture, bilateral free trade agreements and the impacts of free trade rules on developing countries from a social justice perspective.

About IATP

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota with offices in Washington D.C. and Geneva.

Agriculture in the climate talks

TIANJIN, OCTOBER 18, 2010 — The climate negotiations in China where countries finished negotiating for six days (October 4–9) wrapped up just over a week ago. This was the countries' last chance to reach common ground for major decisions on global warming before the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) holds its 16th conference of the parties (COP 16) in less than two months in Cancún, Mexico.

At COP 16, critical decisions have to be made on how industrialized countries will reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and what responsibility non-industrialized countries will have to take. Amidst hundreds of bracketed texts, disagreements abound about the most basic and fundamental issues. How much of a temperature rise can this planet sustain without catastrophic consequences? And by how much should industrialized countries reduce their production of greenhouse gases? Industrialized countries created the problem of global warming, but have increased, rather than reduced, their emissions since legally committing to reduce them under the Kyoto Protocol of the Climate Convention. What role should emerging economies play given that they are headed towards the same development pathway that created this problem? Who will finance actions to reduce global warming and what actions will actually deliver concrete and socially just results in cooling our planet? These are just some of the critical issues where resolution seems far off.

At the heart of these disagreements is the United States government which last year tried to introduce another contract between governments—called the “Copenhagen Accord”—to replace the U.N. treaty process. The idea was to ask for voluntary pledges from all countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, but without any scientific benchmarks. Rather than help, this has created further division and dissension in arriving at a mutually agreed plan to save our planet. This is a particularly bitter irony given that the U.S., as one of the largest polluters, has never ratified the Kyoto Protocol—a legally binding agreement under the UNFCCC that all other industrialized countries agreed to in 1997. Supposedly, the Copenhagen Accord was a way to get the U.S. Congress to agree to put into law a plan to curb U.S. emissions. But this failed too.

Part of the mix of these complex talks is agriculture. Agriculture, together with deforestation and other land use changes related to agriculture activities, is seen as contributing up to 30 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions.¹ It is also one of the sectors that will be hardest hit by the warming of the planet. Erratic

weather—drought, heavy rains and flooding—is already throwing off planting and harvesting cycles and destroying crops. This has enormous implications for feeding the world and supporting the majority of people in developing countries that depend on agriculture as a way of life and livelihoods.

Where is agriculture included?

While there are implications for agriculture throughout the entire text, agriculture features prominently in one chapter of one of the two negotiating streams of the UNFCCC process—the so-called “Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action,” known as the “LCA” inside the negotiating arena. The LCA established four groups: 1) a shared vision between developed and developing countries towards addressing global warming; 2) adaptation; 3) mitigation; and 4) the finance, technology transfer and capacity-building needed in developing countries. The other negotiating track covers rules for a second commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol, known as the “KP” track, where developed countries must make renewed commitments to truly address their carbon footprint—something they have failed to do in the first commitment period.

However, agriculture and food security are explicitly referenced in Chapter IX of the draft LCA text. In the larger UNFCCC process, agriculture is considered one of the “sectoral approaches” where “sector-specific actions” can be taken to mitigate emissions and hence Chapter IX: “Cooperative sectoral approaches and sector-specific actions in agriculture.” Though one of many sectors that cause global warming emissions, it is the only one that has received an entire chapter for consideration under the LCA. This chapter was largely agreed in Copenhagen and laid dormant this past year in the context of the talks given the intense deadlock on all other fundamental aspects of the negotiating process.

According to corridor talk in Tianjin, the agriculture chapter on sectoral approaches remains largely agreed. However, the entire text, as well as decisive paragraphs of the chapter, remain in brackets indicating that there is no final consensus on the chapter as yet. Insiders suggest that the chapter may not be agreed unless the other more prominent outstanding issues in the LCA text are agreed. Some of the key points of the chapter, supported by the G-77, include that: agriculture productivity needs to increase in a sustainable manner; the rights of indigenous peoples and their traditional knowledge and practices must be recognized; any attempts to mitigate emissions in this sector should keep adaptation to climate change in mind and not “adversely affect food security” or livelihoods; and any measures taken in the context of this chapter should not discriminate against trade. Bolivia added additional text in support of international law supporting indigenous peoples’ rights. The language related to non-discrimination and trade protectionism against agriculture was introduced by Argentina and supported by G-77 countries. The key decisions of this chapter, if agreed, ask parties to take into account “their common but differentiated responsibilities and their specific national and regional development priorities” in promoting and cooperating with each other in research and development, and technology transfer, to reduce greenhouse gases. Parties should focus on those measures that “improve the efficiency and productivity of agricultural systems [and management of emissions from livestock] in a sustainable manner and those that could support adaptation to the adverse effects of climate change, thereby contributing to safeguarding food security and livelihoods.”

The reference to “common but differentiated responsibility” refers to the fact that developed and industrialized countries that caused global warming and continue to pollute the planet should take on more of the burden in reducing the emissions. The only new brackets since COP 15 were added in August by Saudi Arabia on the “management of emissions from livestock”—presumably to counter balance its concerns about bunker fuels.²

The agriculture chapter also does a series of other things. It requests that a technical body within the UNFCCC process, called the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA), establish at its next session a work program on agriculture. This body will next meet in Cancún and again in June 2011. The language in the chapter “invites” parties to submit the content and scope of the work program by March 22, 2011 and asks the secretariat to compile these views in a “miscellaneous document” for consideration when the SBSTA meets in June 2011. Several civil society groups pressed to include their participation in these submissions last December when this chapter was first negotiated at COP 15 in Copenhagen. A reference to observers or stakeholders is still missing from the text going into COP 16. The entire chapter, however, is still in brackets and therefore not agreed. This means that the possibility to include observers still exists if governments insert this language into the chapter prior to COP 16, November 29–December 10.

Undoubtedly, agribusiness is keeping its eye on this chapter and will play an important role in providing input on the scope and content of any work program submitted to the SBSTA, if COP 16 decides that a work program on agriculture needs to be initiated. There are also other international bodies such as the FAO that have played and will continue to play an advisory role on such a work

program.³ Moreover, since Copenhagen, 28 countries no compose the Global Research Alliance on Agriculture Greenhouse Gases with New Zealand serving as the secretariat. It is composed of three research groups: Livestock (coordinated by New Zealand); Croplands (coordinated by the U.S.) and Paddy Rice (coordinated by Japan). Perhaps not coincidentally, the results of the alliance's year-long research is also expected to be delivered in March 2011—the same time as inputs are to be expected in the SBSTA if this decision is passed in Cancún.

The state of the agriculture chapter

Those in Tianjin following agriculture are saying that governments do not want to tinker with this chapter too much. Some governments are interested in forwarding this text, as it is, for a decision in Cancún, irrespective of what happens to other areas of the negotiations. Others say that while all major areas of the negotiations stay deadlocked, this chapter cannot be forwarded as a decision in isolation. In the middle of the week, the chair of the LCA distributed a series of elements that she proposed could be included in a “package” of decisions at COP 16. A work program for agriculture in the SBSTA was one of them. The package was never approved and the decision to do so has been postponed to COP 16.

At the end of the Tianjin conference, with barely even on consultation session devoted to it, the agriculture chapter remained unchanged. It is expected to be delivered as it is for further negotiation in Cancún. Civil society groups interested in ensuring that food sovereignty, rural livelihoods, biodiversity and sustainable farming practices that support small farmers and the environment are respected in the climate talks will be paying attention to this important decision in Cancún.

A roadmap for action on agriculture and climate?

In a few short weeks from now (October 31–November 5), however, the Global Conference on Agriculture, Food Security and Climate Change (<http://www.afconference.com>) will be hosted in the Hague by the government of Netherlands in cooperation with Ethiopia, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Vietnam, the World Bank and the FAO. The last two days of this six-day conference will be a series of ministerial-level roundtables with a “final roadmap for action” on agriculture and climate change. We can expect that the conference will be a good indicator of the political jockeying that will take place regarding agriculture's fate in the context of the UNFCCC process.

The conference is organized as a series of working groups during the day with an “Investment Fair” every evening. The “results from the investment fair” will be presented in the closing plenary of the meeting. Working groups are centered on highlighting “best practices” on “climate-smart” agriculture—a term coined explicitly for this conference with little indication as to what it means—including policy support measures for adaptation and mitigation; tools and technologies; and two working groups devoted to financing (voluntary and compliance markets and a session devoted entirely to public sector “innovative financing” for agriculture). Including the two working group sessions and the investment fair, the conference agenda seems to lean towards financing for agriculture upon inclusion of the sector in the climate talks, with a major focus on markets.

Given the considerable concerns related to voluntary markets related to the forestry sector under REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) in terms of actual environmental integrity of such schemes and other social concerns, the inclusion of agriculture into climate finance initiatives that are based on a markets and an offsets approach opens a large debate about the science, integrity, feasibility and impacts of potential schemes, particularly with regards to equity and environmental justice for small holders and its consequences for land tenure and food sovereignty.

See iatp.org/climate for IATP's climate resources.

Resources

1. Jim Kleinschmit, “Agriculture and Climate: the Critical Connection,” Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, December 2009. Available at <http://www.iatp.org/iatp/publications.cfm?accountID=451&refID=107076>.

2. Emissions from international aviation and maritime transport and how they are dealt with in the context of sectoral approaches for mitigation is of concern to oil exporting countries such as Saudi Arabia. For more information, see: http://unfccc.int/methods_and_science/emissions_from_intl_transport/items/1057.php.

3. FAO, Towards a Work Programme on Agriculture, June 2010. Available at <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2010/smsn/igo/081.pdf>. See also: FAO, Enabling Agriculture to Contribute to Climate Change Mitigation, February 2009. Available at <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2008/smsn/igo/036.pdf>.