

How the United Nations climate change COPs are failing finance, food systems (and much else), and what to do about it

R. Edward Grumbine*

Centre for Mountain Futures, Kunming Institute of Botany, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Kunming 650201, Yunnan, China

* Corresponding author, E-mail: ed.grumbine@gmail.com

Closing the 29th United Nations Conference of the Parties on Climate Change (COP 29), Simon Stiell, Executive Director of the UN climate organization, summed up progress: 'We still have a very long road ahead... but the UN Paris Agreement is humanity's life-raft; there is nothing else'^[1].

Stiell is correct; there is no multilateral alternative to the COP process. But from climate finance to food systems transformation, COPs now appear incapable of delivering actions in time to meet the 2015 Paris Agreement goals of limiting global average temperature rise to 1.5–2.0 °C.

There exist too many holes in our climate life raft; a quick survey of outcomes from COP 29 shows the extent of the damage^[2].

Billed as the 'climate finance COP', the main goal of COP 29 was to negotiate new commitments from developed world countries to fund climate action in middle- and low-income countries, many of which have fallen far behind in their financial, technical, and institutional capacity for climate mitigation and adaptation.

It was clear that these negotiations would be contentious—after all, current research shows that a minimum of USD \$1.3 trillion/year is needed^[3] even as wealthy countries have struggled to meet the previous funding target of USD \$100 billion/year.

The new COP 29 climate finance goal is now set at USD \$300 billion/year, with further funding from all public and private sources to reach at least USD \$1.3 trillion by 2035. But nothing is guaranteed or targeted for countries most in need, none is aimed at specific sectors (such as food systems), and all of these monies will likely lose some 25% of their value over the next decade due to inflation. In moving from a USD \$100 billion to a USD \$300 billion/year commitment, a 'breakthrough agreement' according to the UN, the 'climate finance' COP has reduced our annual climate debt from USD \$1.2 trillion/year to USD \$1 trillion/year.

Fraught negotiations around finance took attention away from other large holes in our collective climate life raft.

Results from the first-ever Global Stock Take, a technical review of climate action progress delivered last year at COP 28, were challenged by several blocks of countries. Dissenting parties felt that setting new targets based on Stock Take results would infringe on sovereign choices on how to meet the Paris goals. This sets up a logical disconnect between parties agreeing to specific Paris temperature targets while rejecting any science-based suggestions on how to achieve such goals. Lacking agreement, this issue was punted to COP 30 in 2025.

Questioning the efficacy of the Global Stock Take had ripple effects throughout COP 29. No agreement on the Stock Take means that it will have little influence on revisions of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), each parties' action plans detailing how they will align their climate actions with the Paris 1.5 °C goal^[4]. No current NDCs meet Paris targets; new revisions are due in February 2025. But despite intense lobbying to use Stock Take

conclusions to inform NDC revisions, all decisions were shunted to COP 30. The problem is that these decisions will come *after* new NDCs are completed.

Discussion around food systems transformation was also pushed to COP 30 and beyond. Data show that agriculture and food contribute around 33% of all greenhouse gas emissions^[5], and a year ago at COP 28, 162 parties acknowledged that food systems are essential to meeting Paris goals. At COP 29, however, so little progress was made on this critical sector that momentum was lost. Finance negotiations made no mention of food systems. No formal COP advice on agriculture or food security will guide NDC revisions. Nothing was decided about land-use change and the impact of new agricultural lands, even as global deforestation grows. No discussion was evident around defining a global food systems framework, supporting national nutrition guidelines, greening food supply chains, or enabling socially just transitions throughout food systems. Thirty parties did agree to reduce methane emissions from landfills, but action on the huge emissions from animal agriculture went missing. And, after two years of debate, the only formal COP work program addressing agriculture finally reached one agreement — how to set up an online information portal for farmers.

Food was not the only casualty at COP 29. Negotiations ground to a halt on mitigation, climate adaptation, the Just Transitions Work program, Loss and Damage Fund implementation, and reducing fossil fuel subsidies.

Add all this up and it is clear that the climate COP in its current form is no longer fit to deliver action in time to meet Paris targets. But if there is no multilateral alternative to UN climate meetings, what can be done?

Halfway through COP 29, a group of global climate leaders and scientists published an open letter calling for reform of the UN COP system to 'shift away from negotiations to the delivery of concrete actions'^[6]. Reforms would include: additional pre-COP meetings organized by sector and region to help negotiators manage challenging workloads; creation of rigorous accountability mechanisms to hold parties' to their pledges; designing inter-party peer review of climate action progress; delivering more climate finance for poverty alleviation and social equity; and more.

Given the intransigence of parties who remain wedded to fossil fuels, ongoing nation-state needs for energy during the global transition toward net zero, and current geopolitical tensions, chances for COP reform are unknown.

But several things are certain. Party pledges under the Paris Treaty are wholly inadequate. Even if the 2025 NDCs better align with Paris, there is not enough money to implement them. Climate impacts are already occurring, even as we begin to see reduced carbon sequestration from multiple global ecosystems^[7]. New research suggests that much of the world may exceed 3.0 °C by 2060^[8].

After COP 29, we can continue to sell ourselves stories about the adequacy of multilateral climate actions. But if we want a habitable world in the mid-term future, we have little choice but to act with greater ambition today.

Author contributions

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