Legal Response International

Agriculture Explainer

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Agriculture, here understood in the broad sense under the UNFCCC encompassing food security, crop and livestock production and related land uses, plays a central role in global climate and socio-economic dynamics, **providing livelihoods** for nearly 2.5 billion people and making a critical contribution to global food security. It is also a key source of greenhouse gas emissions, **accounting** for approximately 21 to 37% of global emissions, considering agriculture, forestry, and other land uses. At the same time, agriculture is highly exposed to the impacts of climate change and possesses significant mitigation and adaptation potential, particularly through sustainable agricultural practices. It therefore emerges as a strategic sector in climate policy.

Legal Foundations of Agriculture in the Climate Regime

Agriculture under the UNFCCC

Agriculture within the climate negotiations process is addressed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Two key articles explicitly deal with agriculture-related issues: Articles 2 and 4 of the Convention.

Article 2 sets out the objective of the Convention and states that greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere must be stabilised within a timeframe sufficient to "ensure that food production is not threatened". This provision establishes a clear and direct link between, among others, the climate and agriculture, while recognising global food security as a priority.

Article 4 outlines Parties' commitments in support under the Convention: Paragraph 1(c) provides for the transfer and dissemination of technologies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions across various sectors, including agriculture and forestry. Paragraph 1(d) addresses the protection of carbon sinks (e.g. the land, ecosystems or potential technologies that can absorb and remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere) and recognises the role of forests and land in climate regulation. It thereby provides a legal foundation for climate policies related to forests and land use. Paragraph 1(e), while acknowledging that agriculture is a sector particularly vulnerable to climate change, calls for the development of national adaptation plans in vulnerable sectors such as agriculture and water management, as well as efforts to combat drought and desertification in Africa.

Throughout the UNFCCC Convention and related instruments, including the Paris Agreement, "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities" (CBDR-RC) reflects the uneven distribution of historical responsibility for climate change and capacity to respond to it. It recognises that those least responsible for emissions are often most affected. These disparities, alongside differing income levels, inform states' respective obligations, timelines for action, and entitlements or duties regarding climate finance and other means of implementation. CBDR is especially significant in agriculture, where many low-industrialisation countries with limited historical emissions remain highly dependent on climate-sensitive agricultural systems and therefore face heightened vulnerability.

Agriculture under the Paris Agreement

Agriculture is not explicitly mentioned in the Paris Agreement, but it is integrated into several key provisions, reflecting its transversal role in climate action. The preamble recognises the fundamental priority of safeguarding food security and ending hunger, as well as the vulnerability of food production systems to the adverse impacts of climate change.

Article 2 explicitly states that climate action should not threaten food production. This is relevant to Article 4 on mitigation, which aims for so-called sinks to balance out greenhouse gas emissions released from 2050 onwards. Article 4's requirement for countries to develop nationally determined contributions (NDCs) also applies to efforts to reduce emissions from land use and agricultural systems, as well as potential adaptation actions.

The implementation of Article 7 on adaptation emphasises the resilience of food production systems. Additional areas of work relevant to agriculture include Article 5 on carbon sinks and land management, as well as provisions on finance and technology (Articles 9 and 10), which support climate-resilient agricultural practices. References to sustainable development in the Preamble, as well as in Articles 2, 4 and 6, also have implications for food security, economies and agricultural production models. Together, these provisions illustrate that agriculture occupies an important, though indirect, position within the Paris Agreement, at the intersection of mitigation, adaptation, and food security objectives.

Institutional and Procedural Developments

From Marginal Issue to Formal Agenda Item

The recognition of agriculture as a formal subject of climate negotiations under the UNFCCC resulted from a gradual process driven by the sustained engagement of Parties. Despite being recognised within the UNFCCC, discussions on agriculture remained largely marginal in climate negotiations between 1992 and 2007.

Although Parties historically agreed on the importance of addressing agriculture within the international climate regime, discussions have been polarised due to the sector being situated at the intersection of mitigation, adaptation, food security, rural development and trade, leaving persistent divergences over its specific priorities and objectives.

The gradual integration of agriculture into the negotiations effectively began with **Decision 1/CP.13** adopted at COP 13 in 2007 (the Bali Action Plan), which established the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action (AWG-LCA). Agriculture was addressed through the consideration of sectoral approaches and sector-specific actions under paragraph 1(b)(iv) of the Bali Action Plan, to enhance implementation of Article 4.1(c) of the Convention on the transfer of technologies, practices and processes that would prevent the anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases in specific sectors.

In the following years, discussions became structured around diverging visions of climate action in agriculture. Developing countries including the African Group of Negotiators (AGN), the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), and the G77 and China, emphasised the importance of food security, resilience, and rural livelihoods. By contrast, developed countries favoured an approach focused on emissions measurement and mitigation technologies, contributing to polarised debates between adaptation and mitigation priorities.

An institutional compromise was eventually reached at COP 17 in 2011 through **Decision 2/CP.17**, which mandated the consideration of agriculture under the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA). Subsequent SBSTA sessions continued technical discussions through workshops and expert exchanges on agriculture and climate change.

In the run-up to COP 21 in Paris, these activities helped to gradually overcome political deadlocks by promoting a science-based approach, sharing experiences, and improving methodologies. They also paved the way for a broader consideration of agriculture in the Paris Agreement, under both mitigation (Article 4) and adaptation (Article 7).

The Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture (KJWA)

The Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture (KJWA) was established at COP 23 in Bonn, under the Fijian COP presidency, through **Decision 4/CP.23**. It mandated that agricultural issues be addressed jointly by the SBI and the SBSTA (para. 1). Between 2018 and 2022, the KJWA functioned around six thematic areas and was implemented through SBSTA and SBI-led workshops, expert meetings, and synthesis reports. The outcomes were compiled in the Koronivia workshop synthesis reports (UNFCCC, 2018–2022). The process reflected an integrated approach to agricultural climate action, encompassing institutional coordination and implementation arrangements, scientific and technical knowledge exchange, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and climate finance, including engagement with the Green Climate Fund.

The KJWA concluded at COP 27 (2022) in Sharm el-Sheikh, with recommendations to guide implementation that included adaptation assessment tools, sustainable management of soils, water and livestock systems, as well as socio-economic dimensions and food security. As a continuation, COP 27 established the Sharm el-Sheikh Joint Work on Implementation of Climate Action on Agriculture and Food Security (SSJWA), thereby strengthening the institutional anchoring of agriculture within the UNFCCC and advancing technical discussions on climate action, adaptation, and food security in the agricultural field.

Sharm el-Sheikh Joint Work on Implementation of Climate Action on Agriculture and Food Security (SSJWA)

The SSJWA was established through **Decision 3/CP.27** for the period 2022–2026. It aims to strengthen the implementation of climate action in agriculture and food security, including the implementation of the outcomes of the KJWA (para. 14).

Operationalised through the secretariat, the SSJWA:

- Promotes a holistic approach to agriculture and food security;
- Enhances institutional coordination;
- Strengthens stakeholder partnerships;
- Provides support and technical advice
- Develops knowledge and research and development sharing;
- Monitors and evaluates progress; and
- Facilitates policy exchanges.

The secretariat supports this work through structured activities:

- The preparation of annual synthesis reports (para. 15(a)).

The **first annual synthesis report**, reviewed at SB 62, provides an overview of all activities undertaken by constituted bodies and financial and technical entities in the context of agriculture and food security since 2013.

The **SBSTA** and the **SBI** set out elements to inform the annual synthesis report, recalling the invitation to relevant organisations and entities to submit information. They further mandated the secretariat to include in the report synthesised information on financial needs and allocations, as well as on challenges and barriers to accessing support for climate action in agriculture and food security, including capacity-building and technology development and transfer.

- The organisation of in-session hybrid workshops on agriculture and food security (para. 15(b)).

The first **in-session workshop** was held in hybrid format at SB 62 on systemic and holistic approaches to implementation of climate action on agriculture, food systems and food security, understanding, cooperation and integration into plans.

- The establishment of an online portal for sharing information on relevant policies and initiatives (para. 16).

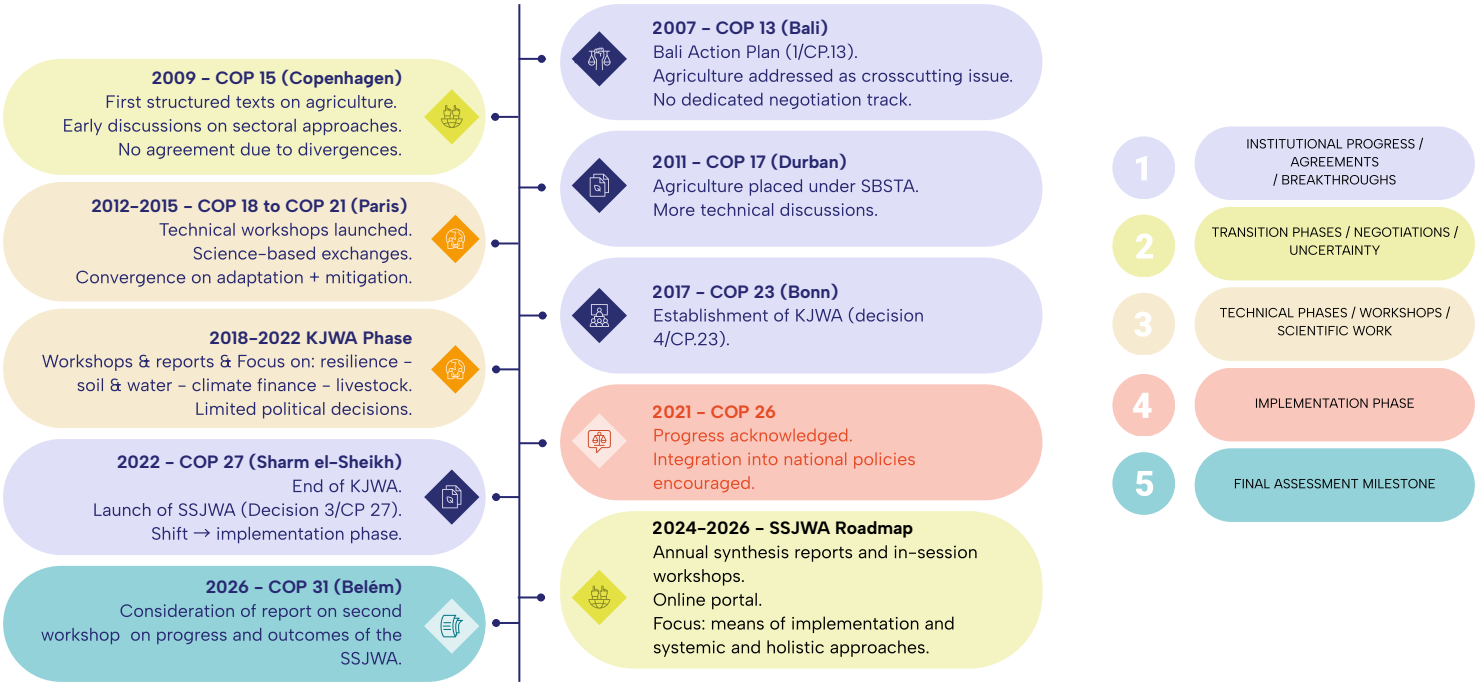
The **online portal** was presented at COP 29 (SB 61), where Parties agreed on its structure. Welcoming the work of the

secretariat at SB 62, the SBSTA and the SBI reiterated the need to improve the structure, functionalities and accessibility of the online portal, in line with the views expressed by Parties at SB 61, including to enable the classification of submissions. They also requested a report to be provided at SB 64 on the portal's use and uptake.

- Parties were also given time to coordinate joint work, including reflecting on the workshops and reports, and to identify conclusions or recommendations.

The SSJWA, therefore, reflects the transition towards the focus on implementation within the climate regime, specifically implementing and operationalising the outcomes of the KJWA.

Agriculture in UNFCCC Negotiations (2007–2026)



Diverging Political Priorities and Implementation Challenges

Following three years of stalled negotiations, SB 63, at COP 30 was expected to serve as a key moment to take stock of progress and to provide political guidance and momentum for the final year of the Joint Work. However, despite agriculture's prominent place in the COP 30 Action Agenda, signalling the Presidency's political motivation to address agriculture, limited progress was achieved during the Subsidiary Bodies' session due to persistent disagreements over the draft negotiating text.

Long-standing tensions between developed and developing countries resurfaced, particularly on priorities related to agriculture and food security. Developing countries, in particular the G77 and China, emphasise adaptation, resilience, and the need to increase agricultural production to ensure food security. In contrast, developed countries, including the EU's member states and the EIG group, place greater emphasis on mitigation, promoting technological solutions such as precision agriculture and digital innovation. Echoing divisions held in the run-up to COP 17 (2011).

These divergences also emerged around the concept of "food systems", introduced under Decision 3/CP.27 (generally understood as the relations among all actors and activities needed to feed a population). While developed countries support a more comprehensive transformation of food systems, developing countries adopt a cautious approach, highlighting food security and rural development concerns, while expressing reservations about the potential impacts of structural transformations on their agricultural economies.

Discussions on the means of implementation for advances in agriculture and food systems continue to prove controversial. Developing countries emphasise the need for increased, predictable, and accessible funding to support agricultural transitions, while developed countries focus on the efficient use of funds and the mobilisation of the private sector. At COP 30, this led the EU to oppose any references to Art. 9.1 (requiring developed countries to provide financial resources to assist developing countries) in an agriculture-related decision.

Parties also differ on preferred technical and technological pathways. During the workshop on systemic and holistic approaches, several developed and developing country Parties, funding institutions and observer organisations spotlighted agroecology as an effective approach for adaptation and mitigation that also delivers on biodiversity, health, rural livelihoods and other Rio Convention agendas. AI-farming practices, as well as carbon markets, were also proposed by some Parties during the workshop and subsequent negotiations. Among other main areas of divergence, the Parties were unable to agree on the role of the outcomes of the Standing Committee on Finance's Forum on accelerating climate action and resilience through financing for sustainable food systems and agriculture.

While some Parties considered that the outcomes did not adequately reflect their expectations and therefore only took note of the results, several developed countries welcomed the outcomes and encouraged further consideration in future discussions.

As a result of the fundamental divergences between Parties, only procedural conclusions were adopted, deferring substantive discussions to SB 64 in Bonn.

Upcoming Discussions

In line with the established roadmap, the next phase of the Sharm el-Sheikh Joint Work will focus on consolidating discussions and advancing implementation-oriented outcomes. Parties will discuss the following topics:

- The upgrade of the **Sharm el-Sheikh online portal**, with a report from the secretariat on the portal's usage and traffic;
- The review of the **second annual synthesis report** prepared by the Secretariat;
- The second in-session workshop on "Progress, challenges, and opportunities related to identifying needs and accessing means of implementation for climate action in agriculture and food security, including the sharing of best practices"; and
- Continued consideration of the report from the first in-session workshop on systemic and holistic approaches to climate action in agriculture, food systems and food security.

At COP 31 in November 2026, Parties are expected to consider the report of the second in-session workshop and to finalise discussions on the progress and outcomes of the joint work for submission to the Conference of the Parties.

Discussions on means of implementation are likely to address both the quantity and quality of finance, including implications for grant-based and private finance in agriculture.

While COP 29's decision on the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) set a target of USD 300 billion annually by 2035, it did not specify the share of grant-based finance. UNFCCC negotiations and broader geopolitical dynamics suggest that developed countries are likely to emphasise private and blended finance mobilisation, whereas developing countries are expected to advocate for a stronger role for grant-based finance in agriculture.

Importantly, Parties will also consider the future of agriculture negotiations, with the SSJWA's mandate ending at COP 31. Despite what seems to be broad agreement on the need to pursue agriculture negotiations, the specific form of these discussions remains unclear. As such, the termination of the SSJWA without follow-up seems unlikely.

Many developing countries would argue that only a work programme would offer the concrete and durable framework to strengthen climate action across agricultural and food systems.

The transition to low-emission agricultural and food systems is dependent on access to means of implementation, and in particular, predictable and accessible financing. In this regard, the development of more formal guidelines on agriculture within existing financial mechanisms could help give greater priority to the sector and support more targeted actions, while a future work programme with specific criteria and safeguards in place could support their implementation and monitoring.

Agriculture in National Climate Planning: NDCs and NAPs

Nationally Determined Contributions: Tracking Ambition

The integration of agriculture into NDCs is grounded in Article 4 of the Paris Agreement, which requires Parties to prepare, communicate and update their NDCs without sector-specific obligations. As a result, agriculture is addressed in a differentiated manner depending on national circumstances, mainly under mitigation (through emissions reductions in the AFOLU sector – Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Use) and adaptation (through resilience-building and food security), in connection with Article 7 on adaptation.

The findings from the **Food Forward NDCs report** show a clear increase in the recognition of agriculture and food systems in NDCs. 93% of NDCs include at least one measure related to the sector (compared to 86% previously), and 74% integrate both mitigation and adaptation dimensions: Nature-positive approaches such as agroecology, climate-smart agriculture and sustainable livestock systems are included in 88% of NDCs, although agroecology and agroforestry remain unevenly distributed and mainly concentrated in developing countries. In addition, only 28% of NDCs address sustainable consumption, despite notable progress. Measures related to the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples and local communities (71%), as well as food loss and waste (45%), are increasing.

Overall, the third generation of NDCs reflects a gradual shift toward a more systemic and inclusive approach to food systems, but still reveals significant gaps in ambition linked to means of implementation, including finance, capacity-building and technical support, many of which remain conditional on external support.

National Adaptation Plans: Operationalising Resilience

NAPs established under the UNFCCC through **Decisions 1/CP.16** and **5/CP.17**, are the main instrument for medium and long-term adaptation planning. Agriculture plays a central role within this framework due to its high vulnerability to climate change and its importance for food security and rural livelihoods. According to the UNFCCC **2025 NAP report on progress** covering the period from 1 November 2024 to 30 September 2025, 67 developing countries — including 23 LDCs and 14 SIDS — as well as 13 developed countries had submitted their NAPs to the UNFCCC secretariat, with around 67% identifying agriculture as a priority sector.

The report shows that NAPs reflect a gradual shift towards more operational adaptation approaches covering the full range of food systems, including climate-resilient agriculture, sustainable land and water management, post-harvest loss reduction, and strengthened food system infrastructure. They also emphasise inclusive approaches involving women, youth, smallholder farmers, and local communities.

In addition, the report highlights efforts to strengthen readiness, as well as improved access to finance and technical support across all stages of NAP development and implementation. Supported by climate funds (Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund, Least Developed Country Fund), UN agencies, and UNFCCC mechanisms, these efforts are gradually improving the formulation and implementation of plans. However, implementation still depends heavily on effective access to finance, as well as strengthened institutional capacities and delivery systems in developing countries.

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