



Missing from the Paris Climate Agreement: Any mention of industrial agriculture

By Mia MacDonald, Executive Director, Brighter Green and Chair, Green Belt Movement International-U.S.

"Something everyone should know about the COP 21 climate deal: the words 'fossil fuels' do not appear. Neither do the words 'oil' or 'coal,'" writer and activist Naomi Klein observed in a much-retweeted Tweet. This is startling, given that the focus of the recent Paris climate conference and ongoing climate change negotiations is the reduction and rapid elimination of fossil fuels in favour of low- or zero-emission sources of renewable energy.

Fossil fuels are not the only important words missing from the Paris Agreement text though. The text—agreed by nearly 200 countries at the UNFCCC COP 21 summit—pledges to keep global temperature increases to less than 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to work toward a more ambitious target, of limiting the overall temperature rise to 1.5°C. But the Agreement largely ignored a crucial fact: what the world eats and how it produces its food are central factors in addressing climate change.

The global livestock sector already accounts for a significant share of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, 14.5 per cent, as much as tailpipe emissions from the world's transportation sector. It is also responsible for nearly half of the world's methane emissions (and methane is at least twenty five times more potent than CO₂ in terms of global warming impact). Livestock and soy production are

by far the main causes of deforestation in South America, the continent with the world's highest deforestation rates, and meat and feed production are also key drivers of forest loss and land use change in other regions.

If current trends continue, global meat consumption is expected to rise by 76 per cent by 2050. It will

be almost impossible to achieve the targets agreed in Paris without a shift to eating, and producing, less meat, as well other animal products.

So, it's surprising to find this issue not addressed in the Paris Agreement. How could a 31-page document on the fate of the planet and agreed to by 195 countries not



Pigs being transported in China, still captured from "What's for dinner?" film. Brighter Green

mention industrial animal agriculture's contribution to greenhouse gas emissions even once? No mention of "meat," "cattle," "fish," or "livestock," either.

It's also worth noting some of the other words that aren't included in the Paris agreement. There is no mention of "animals" or "other species", and the word "biodiversity" only occurs once. Don't non-human animals also have a stake in climate change, and a right to liveable habitats, breathable air, healthy soils, stable oceans, and intact ecosystems? Partly, these absences reflect the nature of these agreements and how they're generated. They're aspirational as much as proscriptive in order to allow countries to feel they have options in how they implement them—and, frankly, to get governments to buy in to them and not be dissuaded from doing so by national interests and lobbies (i.e., in the U.S., as in many other large GHG-emitting countries, the fossil fuel industry and agribusiness).

The challenge now is to leverage the commitments that have been made, with a view to creating new norms and, in time, new, more inclusive language. For example, the agreement "welcomes the efforts of all non-Party stakeholders to address and respond to climate change, including those of civil society, the private sector, financial institutions, cities and other subnational authorities."

This could be read as suggesting that organisations involved in



Chicks hatched in incubator drawers. Farm Sanctuary



Chicken slaughterhouse. Farm Sanctuary

animal protection (wild and domestic), private companies developing plant-based alternatives to meat and dairy products (and investors helping them grow), and others are being invited to put forward proposals for addressing climate change. Is it a strong invitation? Well, it's probably stronger for businesses than for civil society writ large. But it's still a way in to the discourse. We shouldn't forget that.

The agreement also recognises the importance of "sustainable

lifestyles and sustainable patterns of consumption and production." This is boilerplate language that's increasingly common in international environmental agreements and analysis. Nonetheless, it offers an opportunity to argue for the many practical and achievable ways that diets low in or free from animal products reduce or eliminate GHGs at the point of consumption and production—including the fossil fuels and resulting carbon dioxide emissions that most of the delegates in Paris were focused on.

"Food" does appear three times in the text, including a call in Article 2 to safeguard "food security" and end hunger, and to recognise the "particular vulnerabilities of food production systems to the adverse impacts of climate change." This framing alludes to, but doesn't really capture, the drama, urgency, or hugely destabilising effects global warming is already having on agriculture in the shape of water shortages, erratic rainfall, higher temperatures, and desertification.

The text also observes that adaptation measures should not threaten food production. I was told this phrase was inserted into the text by Argentina, one of the

world's top producers and exporters of soy for livestock feed, as well as a significant meat producer. Other leading meat and feed 'powers' and big GHG emitters like the U.S., E.U., Canada, Brazil, and China didn't object.

There's a flipside, however. It can also be argued, with solid data, that intensive animal agriculture itself threatens food production, especially sustainable, equitable, and climate-resilient food systems. This is because of its enormous water, land, and chemical fertiliser requirements, the virtually lifeless monocultures it creates, and the massive water pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity losses it drives. And animal

agriculture can't seriously be described as offering a "low GHG" pathway, given its contribution to GHGs.

Some said as much in Paris, at least outside the formal negotiating rooms. "It's completely unacceptable that diet and especially the meat question is not figuring prominently on the agenda of the COP," according to Jo Leinen, a German member of the European Parliament, speaking at an official side event Brighter Green co-sponsored on meat and greenhouse gas emissions at the climate summit, [1] along with Chatham House, Humane Society International, and the EAT Initiative. Most who attended agreed: this should be a matter for public policy, not a fringe concern of the small, but growing, number of the world's 'climate vegans'.

As my colleagues from Chatham House—who completed a recent global study on public attitudes toward and awareness of the role of meat in climate change [2]—point out, researchers from Cambridge University have found that a global transition to healthier diets could cut CO₂ equivalent emissions by an extra six billion tonnes by 2050, nearly all from reduced meat consumption. A focus on dietary change could also lower the costs of climate mitigation by up to 50 per cent by 2050. Clearly, such dietary change must be included in the agenda for future action to combat climate change.



[1] COP21 webpage, Brighter Green, accessed 17 February 2016, <http://brightergreen.org/cop21/>

[2] Livestock - climate change's forgotten sector: Global public opinion on meat and dairy consumption, Chatham House, December 2014, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20141203LivestockClimateChangeBaileyFroggattWellesley.pdf