



Trade and Climate Change Briefing

Issue 4

UNFCCC COP 15, Copenhagen 2009

5 December

AGRICULTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Current negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are working towards a new agreement that will serve to enhance the implementation of the Convention. The Convention, together with its Kyoto Protocol, include commitments that address climate mitigation and adaptation globally, but implementation has historically been weak. Recent scientific evidence and public pressure are pushing countries to ratchet up their efforts in order to avoid the disastrous consequences that, according to the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other sources, will ensue if atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases exceed amounts that would trigger a temperature rise above 2 °C.

The new agreement intends to more meaningfully include the US - which is a signatory to the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol (but never ratified the latter) - and developing countries - which have no fixed mitigation commitments under the Convention or its Protocol. One area under negotiation in the context of discussions on mitigation is that of “cooperative sectoral approaches and sector-specific actions.” Agriculture has received pointed attention in these talks.

Two options posed in the current draft text

Agriculture accounts for 14 percent of global GHG emissions. The economic, social, and environmental impacts of climate change on the agriculture sector will be significant, varied, and complex. In a few cases, these impacts could be positive, but in most - as a result of increased floods, droughts, and even the expansion of biofuel production - global food security could be considerably threatened.

Countries are currently working on a draft text that is broken down into sections, which are being negotiated by sub-groups on the topics signalled within the Bali Action Plan - a decision that initiated the new negotiations and outlined the areas that the new agreement would include. The cooperative sectoral approaches sub-group text, which is currently riddled with brackets and

alternative paragraphs, contains a specific section on the agricultural sector.

In the negotiations, the issue unifies interests across developed and developing country lines, but also heightens sensitivities about potential trade impacts. A short paragraph in the draft text stresses the importance of development priorities but also emphasises the need to ensure activities in the sector do not “result in barriers to or distortion of the international trade system of goods and products of the agricultural sector” - a clear reference to potential sectoral targets, carbon labelling, carbon ‘footprinting’, border tax measures, or other national approaches that could impact global trade competitiveness.

The text poses two alternatives. The first option instructs Parties to make efforts to enhance mitigation in the agriculture sector. The second instructs them to promote and cooperate in the research, development, application, and diffusion of technologies, practices and processes, as a means to enhance sector-specific mitigation. In other words, whereas in the first option sector-specific mitigation efforts would be a binding obligation that could be achieved through various means, including through promotion and cooperation, in the second option mitigation in the agricultural sector is an outcome that could result from such promotion and cooperation.

Food security overlooked?

A significant omission from both options appears to be an explicit reference to the importance of food security.

The first option contains an important reference to the efficiency and productivity of agricultural production systems - widely seen as critical to addressing global food security over the long term in a sustainable manner, especially in developing countries. It also contains a number of references - albeit bracketed - to considerations that could be important to developing countries, such as the need not to harm the interests of small and marginal

farmers; the need to take into account traditional knowledge and processes; the need to acknowledge linkages between mitigation and adaptation; the need for agricultural production systems to be improved in a sustainable manner; and the need to promote and cooperate on technologies, practices, processes and methodologies. As all of these elements are bracketed, it remains unclear which, if any, might remain in an eventual compromise text.

The second option places a cooperative approach at the heart of mitigation strategies. It explicitly specifies that measures taken should not result in barriers to, or distortion of, the international agricultural trading system. It also calls on the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) to develop a mitigation work programme, and invites Parties to submit their views on this. Given the evident need for further analysis and rapid progress on agricultural climate change issues, this would appear to be a welcome inclusion.

Another bracketed clause specifies that sectoral approaches shall not lead to carbon offsets or initiatives that adversely impact forestland; while the goal here appears to be to ensure a focus on international sectoral cooperation, rather than an uncoordinated focus on national emissions targets, some observers say that it may be helpful to rephrase the drafted text to clarify this. Other say that the text could also be revised to covers carbon sinks more generally, in addition to forestland.

Countries may further refine this text during a negotiating session taking place this week in Barcelona, Spain (see related story, this issue). The Barcelona meeting is the final negotiating session prior to the Copenhagen Conference of the Parties this December.

ICTSD Reporting.