How can dairy contribute to a resilient food system? On 12 November—adaptation and agriculture day at COP27—this was the question that the Netherlands East Africa Dairy Partnership put to its diverse panelists, who came from policy, academia and farming backgrounds.

The question was posed within the context of local realities in low- and middle-income countries where food and nutrition security and local economic development objectives make climate adaptation seem more urgent than climate mitigation.
Harry Clark of the New Zealand Agricultural Greenhouse Gas Research Centre, outlined his organization’s joint dairy production research in Kenya with FAO. According to their models, baseline GHG emissions could potentially be reduced by 11–49% through enhanced productivity. But he emphasized that methods must be tailored to local farming systems, culture and the economic barriers that farmers face. ‘We need to obtain data for animals, assess what has worked in the past, and establish what will work in the future to help Kenya meet its ambitious GHG targets,’ Clark said.

Simon Oosting of Wageningen University and Research highlighted the multifunctional role of cattle in East Africa and proposed the novel perspective of looking at sustainable food systems, not individual animals. Referring to the three different cattle farming systems in the region—agro-pastoralism, mixed crop-livestock, and semi-specialised—Oosting talked about the varied uses of cattle in each system, the contributions of the farming systems to wider food systems, their relative impacts on sustainability objectives and the potential for improvements. All these dairy farming systems contribute to food systems, all need support to be sustainable, concluded Oosting.
The two keynote speakers were followed by a panel discussion that included Margrethe Jonkman of Royal FrieslandCampina, and Esther Zulu of Chitetezo Farmer Federation. The moderator was Florence Musiime Umurungi of Rwanda National Dairy Platform, who opened the discussion saying that Rwanda has plans in place for farmers to reduce emissions by 2030.

She asked Jonkman, coming from the Netherlands, a country with considerable industrial dairy farming, what advice she could impart to the Global South. Jonkman said that the Netherlands and FrieslandCampina are supporting countries’ efforts to introduce sustainable practices in dairy, including in East Africa. Their work has found it is important to consider the full system of dairy production rather than target one element, and to take an integrated approach of assessment that includes nutrition and socioeconomic factors.

Esther Zulu, a mixed crop-livestock farmer, was asked how she performed farming while protecting the environment. She described how she uses livestock to support crop farming, such as using manure as fertilizer, and spoke of the importance of sharing farming knowledge with the community.

During the Q&A following the panel discussion, one audience member said, ‘It’s so exciting to see pastoralism being given this space at COP27 today.’ She said that the wellbeing of the pastoralist farmer should also be considered in any sustainability actions, adding that her own schooling all the way up to her PhD was made possible thanks to her mother selling livestock.