

NET ZERO AND COP26



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Net zero is the buzzword of this year's COP. It is not on the negotiating agenda but it is definitely on the messaging agenda. The UK presidency, the organisers of the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26), are putting net zero at the centre of high-profile messages for governments and for cities, regions, businesses, investors, and higher education institutions.

For governments, [the first goal](#) set out by the UK presidency for COP26 is to "secure global net zero by mid-century and keep 1.5 degrees within reach."

There is a parallel process, run by the Chilean and UK so-called "Climate Champions", called the [Race to Zero](#) to get **sub-national and private sector actors** to make their own net zero pledges.

Actors including the UK government, major fossil fuel producers, and a host of other corporate climate polluters have all made pledges to reach net zero emissions by 2050, even as they plan to continue on a fossil fuel pathway. The UK government has a net zero pledge, while also making plans for further North Sea oilfield development.¹ Shell will keep exploring for, producing, and selling fossil fuels even as it claims to be pursuing a net zero strategy.²

Net zero and the Race to Zero are not as benign as they might seem at first glance.

WHAT EXACTLY IS NET ZERO?

We know that stopping warming requires getting global emissions to zero. Unless we stop emissions, the planet will continue to heat up. In its most recent report the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says that for an 83% chance of staying below 1.5°C, only 300 billion more tons of

carbon dioxide can be emitted.³ Getting to zero emissions, and getting there quickly, matters a great deal.

But governments and companies have found a possible escape hatch in wording in the Paris Agreement. The agreement doesn't mention the words "net zero" but in Article 4.1 it does say that

*In order to achieve the long-term temperature goal set out in Article 2, Parties aim to reach global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible, recognising that peaking will take longer for developing country Parties, and to undertake rapid reductions thereafter in accordance with best available science, so as to achieve **a balance between anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks** of greenhouse gases in the second half of this century, on the basis of equity, and in the context of sustainable development and efforts to eradicate poverty.*

Net zero is the idea that **emissions can be balanced out with removals**. This gives polluters a way to avoid having to talk about **zero** emissions, and instead talk about **net** emissions. Another benefit for polluters is that they can make conversations about "net" sound green – greenwashed positive stories about how "nature based solutions" are going to save the day.

NET ZERO AND HISTORY, RESPONSIBILITY AND EQUITY

On the face of it, the science makes sense. We need to stop accumulating emissions in the atmosphere. If natural ecosystems or agroforestry systems can remove some carbon, that's a good thing, right? Not quite.

Here are five reasons why the push for net zero at COP26 needs to be rejected.

1. NET ZERO IGNORES HISTORY.

We can only emit 300 billion more tons of carbon dioxide and safely stay below 1.5°C of warming. We are already seeing devastating climate impacts unfolding at the current 1°C of warming. We are in this predicament because in the last 150 years, developed countries and global elites have already emitted 2,390 billion tons (according to the IPCC). Carbon dioxide accumulates in the atmosphere and stays there for hundreds to thousands of years. Net zero ignores history and just looks towards the future.

2. NET ZERO IGNORES RESPONSIBILITY.

By erasing history, responsibility is also being purposefully erased. We are all being asked to take on the same effort of getting to net zero by mid-century. But historical emitters are more responsible than others, and they must do more than just get their own emissions to zero. Global North countries developed their economies and societies using dirty energy. Because of the climate crisis and other ecological and social impacts, developing countries should not go down that development pathway. Developed countries owe a climate debt and must support developing countries with finance and technology to transition energy and food systems to zero carbon.

3. NET ZERO IS INEQUITABLE.

Most net zero pledges are vague promises to do something by 2050. However, the unequal impacts of climate change are already upon us, and the most vulnerable are right now paying the price of inaction by the most responsible; that price is getting higher by the minute. Moreover, the vague pledges often imply that the removals of carbon from the atmosphere will be stored in natural ecosystems, assuming endless fields and forests, primarily in the global South, that can be used to soak up the emissions of the global elite who overwhelmingly reside in the global North.

For global South communities, especially Indigenous Peoples, this might mean the loss of their land and livelihoods, and human rights abuses.

4. NATURE HAS LIMITS.

Natural sinks cannot hold even a small fraction of the emissions from burning fossil fuels. It's a physical impossibility. Our forests and fields can recover the carbon they have lost over centuries of deforestation and industrial agricultural production, and we must devote significant resources to restoration and transformation. But those ecosystems cannot in addition take up billions of tons of combusted fossil carbon. Moreover, carbon in natural sinks is by nature temporary. Trees grow and die; and climate change actually increases threats to natural ecosystems and their stored carbon through increased droughts and wildfires. Getting to net zero, while continuing to burn fossil fuels, is assuming the impossible is possible.

5. NET ZERO IS A TROJAN HORSE FOR GEOENGINEERING.

Net zero plans frequently rely on assumptions that dangerous, unproven technologies will absorb carbon at some future time. Corporations and governments point to unproven, dangerous, and extraordinarily expensive technologies to magically remove carbon from the atmosphere at some point in the future rather than reduce emissions today. These so-called "negative emissions technologies" that might someday pull carbon dioxide from the atmosphere include bioenergy with carbon capture and storage, and direct air capture. Although neither of these technologies are widely tested or currently available at scale, net-zero-by-2050 pledges often rely heavily on them. Some governments and industries have gone a step further, banking on extensive and extraordinarily perilous interference in the Earth's climate system via geoengineering schemes like solar radiation management.

HOW DOES NET ZERO RELATE TO CARBON MARKETS?

Many proponents of net zero assume that offsetting is the same as getting to net zero.

But of course offsets are about not getting to zero emissions. With offsets, a polluter declares that because they are paying someone somewhere else to do something nice for the climate, their pollution is offset. But they are continuing to pollute. There is no way to get to zero if you are still emitting. There is also no way to get to net zero if you are still emitting – the physics and biology of the planet do not work that way: the atmosphere has limits and so does nature.⁴ Ecosystems can take up the amount of carbon that has been lost from those ecosystems in past centuries. It cannot also fit all the carbon that comes from fossil fuel burning.⁵ Staying below 1.5°C will require both getting emissions towards zero and enhancing ecosystem uptake (removals) of carbon.

The proponents of using carbon markets to achieve net zero ignore this basic science. Moreover, they confound the idea of removals with offsets. These are not the same. Trees can remove carbon from the atmosphere, albeit temporarily -- this process is called carbon dioxide removal. Offsetting might look like removal, because trees might be involved, but the trees are called on to balance out other emissions that continue, enabling a business-as-usual pathway. But that balance will be temporary: when the trees die, the tree carbon joins the emissions in the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide remains in the atmosphere for hundreds to thousands of years – temporary removals cannot balance out permanent emissions. The confusion between removals and offsets is deceptive and profitable, and there is a massive scale-up effort, led by Mark Carney and the Task Force on Scaling Voluntary Carbon Markets (TSVCM), to convince the world that offsets are a legitimate way to get to net zero.

Highly emitting industries, not least the fossil fuel industry as well as agribusiness and the forestry sector, are hoping in all the confusion to deceive the world into imagining that they can buy their way out of emissions reductions, that offsets will somehow balance out their emissions. Meanwhile, the carbon



*Demonstrating against false solutions for the climate crisis at COP24 in Katowice, Poland.
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marketeers are eager to exploit the profits that this confusion will generate, with predictions that the carbon offset market may be a US\$50 billion or US\$100 billion market by 2030.

Of course, the only way there is a US\$50-\$100 billion offset market in 2030 is if companies don't reduce their emissions. Those offsets represent US\$50 or US\$100 billion of investments that could have gone toward **transforming** our energy and food systems, transportation and housing to zero emissions. Instead, that money is being spent to legitimise and carry on emitting-as-usual.

Central to a market are the rules for transactions in that market. The marketeers are hoping that the negotiations on market rules under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement will deliver what they need. But they are not waiting for countries at COP26 to agree rules for an international compliance market. The TSVCM is expected to release its own rules for the voluntary market in advance of the COP26.

FOCUS ON ZERO, NOT NET

One of the most destructive impacts of the focus on net zero is that companies and governments engage in a zero-sum accounting game of balancing emissions with removals, when the most critical and enormous task in front of us is changing systems. We will not get emissions to zero without transforming our systems away from fossil fuels, biomass, deforestation and agribusiness.

WHAT ARE FRIENDS OF THE EARTH INTERNATIONAL'S DEMANDS FOR COP26?



- Governments and companies must focus on real zero, not net zero.
- Clear targets should be established for emissions reductions, separate from any net plans. Governments and companies should also clearly and transparently communicate their plans for ecosystem uptake (removals) and end offsetting in their plans and strategies.
- Governments, especially in the global North, must drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 through absolute reductions in line with their fair share of the global effort to limit temperature rise to no more than 1.5°C. Laws and regulations must keep fossil fuels in the ground; eliminate sources of non-fossil based climate pollution, including industrial wood biomass and emissions-intensive agricultural practices like factory farming; and facilitate a Just Transition⁶ to clean, renewable energy and regenerative farming rooted in principles and methods of peasant agroecology.
- Northern countries must fulfil their climate finance obligations and transfer a fair share of funds and technical assistance to enable countries in the global South to make a just and equitable transition to real zero.
- Focusing on real zero means taking on the challenge of transforming systems that rely on fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial agriculture. Finance must be mobilised that is adequate to the scale of this challenge. Developed countries must take the lead on finance – because of history, responsibility, and their capacity.
- Corporate polluters must not be allowed to participate in COP26. The COP26 presidency must deny entry to corporate polluters, including those who are greenwashing their continued emissions with net zero claims.⁷ Keep them out of the blue zone and keep them out of the green zone.

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