



# How to Read a Net-Zero Pledge

Net-zero pledges must be read critically, since they range from transformative deep-decarbonization approaches to complete corporate greenwashing. Here we consider four key indicators for a net-zero pledge to be considered: timeframe, emissions reductions targets, plan for the net, and likely impacts on communities. These aspects of the pledge indicate the level of ambition—or lack thereof. CLARA emphasizes the importance of considering risks to communities from net zero pledges, and the Box indicates the kinds of questionable activities that might be included in corporate or country plans to reach ‘net zero’.

## Timeframe

As with any climate target, the time for meeting that target is essential. As climate change worsens and the world gets closer to 1.5°C, every bit of pollution and every year matters. 2050 targets are too far into the future to drive the kind of near-term action that is necessary to meet the Paris Agreement goals. Near-term targets matter much more. It’s no longer sufficient to state 2040 or 2050 targets; any credible ‘net zero’ commitment must also have an aggressive 2030 emissions-reduction target, so that the ambition of the target in this critical decade can be evaluated.

## Emission Reduction Targets

Net-zero targets that rely on a large volume of removals are inherently problematic. Any real climate action in a net-zero pledge will be reflected in how much companies are actually promising to reduce their emissions. Understanding what amount of the net-zero targets will come from actually reducing emissions is a critical factor in determining how meaningful the ‘net zero’ commitment is.

## Where is the Net Coming From?

Three types of actions can be used for achieving net zero: land-based removals, technology removals, or buying credit for climate action through a market mechanism.

Offsets through a market mechanism: where credits from climate action carried out by others can be purchased. These are often land-based offsets but can be another form of climate action as well, such as reduction of methane from landfills. Usually the buyer is paying someone else to either avoid

emissions—emissions that may have happened in absence of some kind of action, such as building a renewable energy project or promising not to cut down a forest—or *increase removals* of carbon from the atmosphere. The buyer then purchases the credit for that climate action. REDD+ is one example of programs that fall under this category of action. The buyer can claim to be ‘reaching net-zero’ by buying the right to the ‘credit’ for the climate action.

Second, there are land-based removals carried out directly by the same entity doing the emitting. These projects range from good ecosystem-based climate actions to dubious soil carbon or tree planting schemes. [See Text Box below.] Various sources have documented the numerous cases where indigenous communities were displaced from their lands in the name of carbon offsets—even though indigenous communities are usually the protectors of forested land rather than a cause of deforestation.

## What’s in the Net?

‘Real zero’ pledges are more meaningful than ‘net zero’ pledges, but some ‘net zero’ pledges are more meaningful than others. If the pledge consists mostly of offsets and **carbon dioxide removal** approaches, it may be doing more harm than good. Among the dubious approaches:

- Offsets projects, with a full transfer of carbon credits, so that emissions are actually not reduced at all.
- REDD+ projects that reward hypothetical ‘avoided emissions’ in the form of carbon credits.
- Renewable energy projects and landfill gas removal projects that reward hypothetical ‘avoided emissions’ in the form of carbon credits
- Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR), including afforestation/ reforestation, and plantation development, with potentially very adverse impacts on local land rights and biodiversity
- Ecosystem restoration—welcomed when community-led and focused on restoring ecosystem functions and resilience, using primarily native, climate-adapted, and non-invasive species
- Geoengineering and ‘negative emissions’: bioenergy with carbon capture and storage, direct air capture

Both these and the offsets sold through market mechanisms can end up harming communities and undermining climate action. Projects have caused adverse changes to local land tenure systems as eager buyers look for credits. The most egregious projects have been implicated in human rights abuses. International rules to protect communities in carbon trading have been weakened in recent years.

Not all of these activities end up delivering the promised carbon benefits either. Even strong climate action in the land sector is reversible—the simplest example being when a wildfire burns and destroys a forest, but the growth of that forest was included as a financial ‘asset’ within a carbon offset or credit.

The final type of ‘net’ activity is also the most concerning: technology-based removals. These technologies are designed to, in theory, remove emissions from the atmosphere after they have already been emitted and then stored using some kind of carbon capture and storage technology. Examples include bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS) and direct air capture (DAC). These technologies all have serious concerns though. First, it is not clear that they will work at scale. Neither the technology to capture nor the technology to store meaningfully large amounts of carbon has been demonstrated at scale. Furthermore, in technologies such as BECCS, the demand for large scale biomass can drive land-grabs and force community farmers off their land.

### Look for the Impacts for Communities

It is true that most net-zero pledges being made today lack the necessary detail to get a clear picture of the plan behind the announcement. By examining these three aspects of any net-zero plan (timing, emissions reduction plans, and indications of where the ‘net’ will come from), you can begin to

Many of the activities to build up the net in net-zero are harmful to communities, so heavy reliance on ‘net’ should be viewed with great concern.

get a good sense of what the net-zero pledge will look like in reality and what actions are likely to be pursued first.

The target date is the first indication of ambition. If the pledge is serious about trying to reduce climate impacts, there will be an ambitious 2030 target included (even if there is also a 2050 target).

The emissions reduction pledge is the most crucial. Deep cuts in emissions are the first thing that countries and companies must pursue. By contrast, if promised emission reductions are low or even non-existent, then most of the commitment comes in the form of ‘netting out’ continued emissions. The lower the promised reductions, the bigger the net action will need to be to reach net-zero. There are potential land-use impacts associated with offsetting projects, as well as environmental justice issues associated with ongoing pollution from emissions—meaning that communities negatively impacted by fossil fuel production or petrochemical pollution will continue to suffer.

What type of action is used to meet that demand for net is crucial for assessing impacts on communities. Heavy reliance on the net makes it more likely that companies and governments will be seeking out less reliable and potentially more harmful options, such as BECCS, or tree plantations. In general, any strategy for reaching the net that relies on a large amount of land puts communities at risk for land-grabs, where people can lose their home, job, and main source of food all at once.

### Conclusion

The world has run out of time for offsets. Even if offsets could provide real, substantial, permanent removals—which is by no means guaranteed—we need to be reducing as many emissions as possible, as quickly as possible, in order to limit the catastrophic impacts of global warming. There simply is not time to offset ongoing emissions with other kinds of climate action. To stay within carbon budget and thus the chance to keep warming well below 2°C, the world needs both a zeroing out of emissions and some contribution from removals.

Climate action is an urgent moral imperative, but not all climate rhetoric can be trusted to result in climate action. Net-zero pledges in particular require scrutiny to see what if any climate ambition is being demonstrated and, crucially, what the possible impacts are for communities.

The CLARA network includes climate justice advocates, faith groups, conservation groups, land-rights campaigners, agroecologists, and representative of peoples movements around the globe. Our commitment to social justice brought us into the climate debate and informs our approaches to climate solutions. For more information about CLARA, visit [www.CLARA.earth](http://www.CLARA.earth)

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