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Letter to Editor

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The inconvenient truth about ‘net zero’ emissions

In the international climate discourse, the goal of countries embracing net zero emissions reductions by 2050 has been heralded as showing high ambition.

Coming from the highest official in the United Nations, viz. the Secretary-General, António Guterres himself, the general public can be forgiven into thinking that net zero emissions reductions by the world’s major ‘emitters’ will save us from a planetary climate crisis.

Nothing can be further from the truth and requires deeper scrutiny as to why such net zero pledges will not be able to limit temperature rise to 1.5-degree C since pre-industrial levels.

While efforts to goad governments to do more climate action are laudable, net zero emission targets by 2050 for rich countries and their corporations, will not be enough as they are not ambitious enough.

What is needed to avert a permanent catastrophe is urgent and rapid action on the part of rich developed countries to get to ‘real zero’ emissions now and not ‘net zero’, as this delays action for another 3 decades! This delay, the planet cannot afford.

In recent months, some northern governments and several big corporations, including major fossil fuel companies have announced net zero targets.

Analysis by major civil society groups including ActionAid International, Friends of the Earth International and Third World Network have shown that such net-zero announcements are unambitious, do not go far enough and some are even dubious.

These pledges have been viewed as not being enough in terms of what should be the fair and equitable effort needed by rich countries, within a shrinking carbon budget to limit temperature rise to 1.5 C.

“Far from signifying climate ambition, the phrase ‘net zero’ is being used by a majority of polluting governments and corporations to orchestrate escape clauses so as to evade responsibility, shift burdens, disguise climate inaction, and in some cases even to scale up fossil fuel extraction, burning and emissions. The term is used to greenwash business-as-usual or even business-more-than-usual. At the core of these pledges are small and distant targets that require no action for decades, and promises of technologies that are unlikely ever to work at scale, and which are likely to cause huge harm if they come to pass”, say these climate justice groups.

Much of these net zero pledges are not grounded in deep decarbonisation and rely heavily on nature-based solutions (NbS) as sinks, to sequester the carbon emissions. Much of them rely on carbon-markets to deliver carbon offsets mainly in developing countries. What offsetting means is for developed countries not to reduce their emissions domestically, but to pay developing countries to do the emissions reductions, as it is seen as being more “cost-effective” to buy the carbon credits to offset the emissions generated in the developed world.

With or without carbon offsetting, such pledges create a huge demand for sinks mainly located in the forests, wetlands and grasslands in the developing countries. There is no known published research yet that add up the quantities of carbon removal that make up the net zero pledges of these countries and corporations.

What seems clear though is that the quantity of the sinks needed would exceed the sequestration capacity of the planet by several fold. This will have negative implications for developing countries, including in generating conflicts over land-use, as well as among local communities and indigenous peoples, whose lands and forests are being sought to solve the emissions problem of the rich nations.

Climate justice groups have referred to this as ‘carbon colonialism’.

Limiting temperature rise to 1.5-degree C requires the sharing of the remaining carbon budget in an equitable manner. For a 50% probability of keeping warming below the limit, the carbon budget remaining is 480 gigatonne CO₂ equivalent (GtCO₂eq). At the current rate of emissions of 42 GtCO₂ eq per year, the budget would be exhausted in about 12 years!

With a shrinking carbon budget, the right approach ought to be one where the rich developed world takes the lead in much deeper cuts in their emissions based on a fair-shares approach, that takes into account their historical and current cumulative emissions, including on a per capita basis.

Such equity based proposals never saw the light of day, due to tremendous resistance from developed countries, especially from the United States, on the grounds that no international agreement can dictate a top-down approach to emissions reductions for countries.

In fact, analysis by serious academics and progressive civil society groups have pointed out that rich countries are not doing enough at all.

For instance, one recent analysis “rooted in the principle of equal per capita access to atmospheric commons” by Dr. Jason Hickel from the University of London reported in *The Lancet*, pointed out that as of 2015 the Global North was responsible for 92% of excess emissions. By contrast, most countries in the Global South were within their boundary of fair shares, including India and China (although China will overshoot soon).

Instead of focusing on what the emission reductions ought to be from a fair-shares perspective in order to keep within the remaining carbon budget left in an equitable way, the net-zero mantra allows developed countries to get away with targets which amount to doing too little too late, and passes on the responsibility to developing countries to do the heavy lifting, without commensurate finance and technology transfer.

The Paris Agreement does call for a balance between human emissions and removal by sinks by 2050, but this is to be on the basis of equity and in the context of sustainable development and efforts to eradicate poverty. This is a global aspiration, and is not a country-wise aim. It cannot be country-wise, as this would lead to inequity.

The fallacy of net zero emissions needs to be exposed for what it is. It is no panacea in solving the climate crisis. The rich North cannot run away from what they must do today, which is to go to real zero and to assist developing countries to do their fair-shares, through the finance and technology transfer needed, as well as to build their capacities so that they do not repeat the mistakes of the North.

Net zero is indeed a mirage to delay further action by the rich nations most responsible for the crisis in the first place. The sooner we realise this, the better, for the sake of the planet and the poor.

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