The climate crisis requires urgent, immediate, and radical emission reductions. An over-emphasis on goals in 2050 undermines the urgency of the crisis in public discourse and lulls policy makers into avoiding hard decisions. Action, targets, signals and regulations are needed now - not in 35 years, when many in climate-impacted communities will have already been devastated. Climate science and justice is unequivocal about this.

Long-term goals become attractive to governments, big business and even some civil society groups exactly because they gloss over ‘how’ we get there. They can ignore the real issue of how historical emissions are taken into account and the responsibility of those who have brought us to the precipice of the climate-cliff. It can also encourage and act as cover for unjust and inequitable solutions to gain traction.

To drive more ambition it’s clear that political leaders need to feel pressure from their citizens demanding that they take immediate action. Focusing on 2050 simply turns off the general public, it takes away any agency they may have and leaves tackling climate to the same ‘elites’ who have been ineffective thus far. Grassroots movements all around the world are fighting for their communities, their food, their energy systems, and the world they want to live in now - not in the distant future.

‘Political pragmatism’ cannot mask the failure to lift ambition for rich countries in 2020 and 2030. Making a demand for a 2050 goal simply because rich country politicians and business elites prefer to ‘pass the buck’ is not the answer.

A fair share approach to the existing carbon budget for both 1.5c and 2c makes concrete emissions reductions in 2020, 2025 and 2030 (plus finance and technology transfers to developing countries) the only viable ‘long term’ goal for rich developed countries.

“Zero” Emissions and “Net Zero”

Some countries, businesses and organisations may be deliberately using these terms interchangeably (along with “100% renewables, or “100% decarbonisation”) but the terms mean very different things.

Zero emissions – Means the total amount of emissions from a sector (or sectors) is zero. Usually this means zero emissions from industrial sources (energy, industry, transport) and sometimes it means from all human systems. This means we cannot continue to burn fossil fuels as we would be required to release zero emissions into the atmosphere.

Net zero emissions – Means that the total input of emissions into the atmosphere in a given year minus the emissions removed from the atmosphere equals zero. This means that if we have technologies that ‘suck’ emissions out of the atmosphere we can continue burning fossil fuels - a license to carry on as business as usual.

What will “net zero” mean for food sovereignty and security?

Most of these technologies require the use of land on a vast scale to grow ‘biomass’ (such as biofuel or tree plantations) which draw carbon from the air, and can then be burned for fuel or to produce charcoal for carbon sequestration in soil.

Current studies (from IPCC Working Group III report, Chapter 6) suggest up to 6 billion hectares of land would be required for the scale of reductions proposed - current total crop production globally uses just 1.5 billion so we would need to use the equivalent of displacing all food crops on Earth four times over.

Historically land-grabs in developing countries have heavily impacted on ‘marginal lands’, those used as the livelihoods and homes for small-scale farmers, women, indigenous peoples and pastoralists. Therefore it is the world’s most marginalised communities that are most likely to suffer if land is given over in the drive for ‘negative’ emissions.
Do we need “net zero” emissions to limit warming to well below 1.5°C?

As the IPCC has demonstrated what matters for temperature change is the cumulation of greenhouse gases over time - the total ‘emissions budget’ used.

To limit warming to well below 1.5°C - the threshold considered the difference between dangerous and very dangerous climate change by many scientists, social movements, and over 100 governments - requires us to stick to a very strict emissions budget.

To meet that budget without using large-scale, untested, emission removal technologies is possible - it simply requires much more urgent, much deeper cuts to carbon emissions in the immediate short term.

What does common sense tell us?

We need to learn the lessons of the agro-fuel land grab, which was pushed by many of the same proponents of ‘net zero’ as a climate solution and is still driving landlessness and hunger around the world.

With new pressure on land to act as a carbon sink, the world’s small-scale farmers, indigenous peoples, marginalised and hungry communities will once again be pushed aside to provide false solutions to climate change.

Common sense tells us we must resist the attempt by big business to legitimise “net zero” goals, which pave the way for these risky and harmful technologies - and instead take up the call of local communities to transform our energy systems today while building resilient agro-ecological farming practices that feed us without driving more climate change.