

Real Zero

2019 has seen climate consciousness reshape the political conversation around the world, but for this new awareness to make a difference, we need to get real about targets and timescale, write **Souparna Lahiri, Niclas Hällström** and **Rachel Rose Jackson**.

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Last month, world leaders, climate activists, and youth convened in New York for the highly anticipated U.N. Secretary-General's Climate Action Summit. Instead of the usual half-measures and empty promises, the world was assured there would

be concrete plans and commitments for great ambition from world leaders.

Yet, unsurprisingly, the summit fell far short of its overall objective to stake out a course of action that can truly limit warming to 1.5°C. The cause? Polluting countries and corporations want to have their cake and eat it too – proposing business-as-usual policies that fail to adequately address the crisis.

The science is clear: radical, transformative action is the only way forward.

Escalating frequency and intensity of extreme events already show how dangerous today's 1 degree warming is. The Arctic sea ice is melting faster than anyone expected. A newly released Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report reveals that our oceans are reaching their breaking point. This summer, more than 3,000 fires ignited the Congo rainforest, millions of hectares burnt to a crisp in the Amazon, wildfires raged across the western United States, and forest fires in Indonesia scorched the island of Sumatra.

These events are driven by planet-and-people-damning practices pushed by the very corporations that are primarily responsible for the climate crisis. We're rapidly nearing irreversible tipping points that can trigger runaway warming and collapse of society as we know it.

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The landmark 1.5°C report released by the IPCC last year showed how little ‘carbon budget’ remains. In addition to this stark warning, it also revealed how ambitious action *can* keep us under 1.5°C if we act *now*. Even when confronted with this science, many proposals rolled out last week touted “ambition” when the details are anything but. Many countries remained silent or offered

meager promises to achieve “net”-zero by 2050. Just like painting stripes on a horse doesn’t make it a zebra, calling ineffective and inadequate climate plans “ambitious” when they rely on delayed action and even risky and inequitable technologies such as geo-engineering doesn’t result in sound policy that keeps us below 1.5 degrees.

The reality is that the climate crisis requires the world to reach as close to ‘real’ zero emissions as soon as possible. The biggest cuts must happen in the next decade, with developed countries owning up to their fair share by reaching near zero emissions by 2030, and simultaneously financing climate action in countries least responsible and hardest hit. There can be no trading away or “offsetting” of these obligations, and no deployment of unproven and risky technologies.

The good news is we already know what real ambition looks like.

We know that ambition must include solutions that restore balance with nature, not further abuse it. Curbing industrial agriculture while promoting agro-ecological practices and preserving natural forests offer immediate, cost-effective

and equitable pathways for meeting the 1.5°C target. And solutions like keeping fossil fuels in the ground and transitioning to 100% renewable energy are irrefutable.

Doing all of this will require ending corporate interference in policymaking, new approaches to economic policy and a break from our dogmatic focus on market mechanisms and outdated development models. Policies, bans, regulations and bold public investments can drive unprecedented transformations across all sectors to the future we want.

These solutions are good for people too – when the rights and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples, women and local communities are respected, they protect and restore natural sinks like forests, biodiversity, and ecosystems (which suck up and safely store carbon). Banning fossil fuel extraction and ending incentives and subsidies will return power to people, facilitate deep emissions cuts, and end the stranglehold that has allowed polluting industries to choke climate ambition.

There is no time to waste. Every day of inadequate ambition costs lives and further delay, and people and ecosystems are dying today. We cannot afford policies that delay action, continue extraction or offset emissions from one place to another.

Rather than focus on ‘net’ zero by 2050 – we must direct our focus on immediate far-reaching action for 2020, 2025, and 2030. The era of kicking the can down the road must end.

It’s time for our leaders to stop gambling with “net-zero” loopholes. The ambition brought to the table to address climate change must be as real as the crisis it is seeking to address.

Real ambition means real cuts and real zero, period.

Souparna Lahiri is a climate campaigner and advisor to the Global Forest Coalition, Niclas Hällström is Director of What Next? and Rachel Rose Jackson is a campaigner at Corporate Accountability International. They write here on behalf of the Working Group for Real Solutions– a coalition of climate justice advocates and policy experts committed to advancing meaningful solutions to address the climate crisis.

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