

# Perfection and net zero

Scientists’ and independent observers’ definitions of good outcomes for the planet changes faster than non-scientists can keep up with. The changing goal posts and opinion on ‘good’ is having unintended consequences, and actually derailing environmental performance.

It may surprise you to hear that there is no single unified definition of “net zero” or “carbon neutral”, but there are plenty of references. In the amended Climate Change Act 2008, the UK government commits to net zero by 2050, which they define as:

*“the UK’s total greenhouse gas emissions would be equal to or less than the emissions the UK removed from the environment.”*

This would suggest that unabated emissions could continue as long as they were subsequently removed from the atmosphere. The United Nations goes one step further, tightening the screws in their definition:

*“net zero means cutting greenhouse gas emissions to as close to zero as possible, with any remaining emissions re-absorbed from the atmosphere, by oceans and forests for instance.[1]”*

Following this is the institutional confusion of what absolute, true, science based, nearly zero, net zero ready, “aligned to the Paris Agreement” might or might not mean.

Many independent organisations believe they also know the answer with guidance galore defining terms like absolute zero, true zero, nearly zero, zero carbon, and carbon neutral. Each with their own definition of ‘good’. All of these differing opinions on what defines net zero is causing confusion on what ‘good’ looks like.

Net Zero Carbon  
UN Net Zero  
UK Net Zero  
Zero Carbon Ready  
ISO Net Zero  
SBTi Net Zero Carbon  
Near Zero Carbon  
Carbon Neutrality  
Zero Carbon  
Absolute Zero Carbon  
True Zero Carbon

## The offsetting debate

As an example, up until 2021 achieving carbon neutrality was deemed pushing the corporate boundaries. Aligned to the UK government’s definition of net zero, which allows offsets, more companies saw the benefits of the label at a reasonable cost. This caused a rush for low-cost qualified and certified offsets.

The price of offsetting emissions came in at \$3.82/tCO<sub>2</sub>e in 2021<sup>[2]</sup>. It is therefore often much cheaper for a company to offset emissions than to meaningfully reduce them in the first place, especially if reducing emissions would require an extensive restructuring of supply chains or operations.

The UK government’s definition of “net zero” therefore becomes much more attractive than the UN’s definition. For many organisations their understanding of good was fulfilled and aligned to the UK government’s.

But the goal posts moved. The emergence of new guidance such as the SBTi definition of net zero demands reduction of emissions only. The SBTi define that a 90% reduction in emissions was needed prior to offsetting and net zero claims.

Parallel to this, critics started raising the issue that not all offsets are created equal, good offsets are not cheap and cheap offsets are not good. Removing CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere and putting the planet’s natural environment back to where we found it has become a point of disagreement between scientists and observers.

So, under this new definition of good, corporations stopped offsetting to focus on emission reductions only. A high-profile example being Easy Jet who have recently announced their intention to no longer invest 25 million GBP a year in environmental protection projects in the Amazon and Ethiopian Bale Mountains Eco-regions.



The unintended consequences of moving the goal posts has fast become a major problem for projects that are protecting our planet.

## It’s not an either-or sum

When it comes to carbon emission inventories specifically there should be no hierarchy for reducing emissions to meet the Paris Agreement targets. The raw data shows it requires rapid emission reduction and rapid removal of emissions. It is not an either-or sum.

What “good” looks like will change based upon what’s appropriate for a given industry, sector or geography. Some businesses will be lucky, with opportunities for vastly improved sustainability attracting further business opportunities.

There should be nothing wrong with businesses explaining these opportunities, without fear of greenwashing recrimination. Likewise, there should be nothing wrong with businesses supporting environmental protection of our planet. That surely is a good outcome?

[1] <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/net-zero-coalition>  
[2] <https://climatetrade.com/what-influences-carbon-offset-pricing>