

Climate emergency – We need carbon reduction not carbon offsetting

When politicians debate whether we should be ‘carbon neutral’ by 2030 or 2050 they are really debating what target they think is achievable. They don’t say whether meeting either of these targets will succeed in preventing the climate and ecological crisis. In fact the crisis is already here.

The world is already 1 degree hotter than in pre-industrial times and on course to get 1.5 degrees hotter. This doesn’t sound like a lot but it is destroying lives and livelihoods across the global south; making whole regions uninhabitable; and wiping out entire ecosystems such as coral reefs.

All we know for certain now is that the only *chance* we have of lowering the *probability* that temperatures will rise even further, is to cut greenhouse gas emissions as dramatically and as quickly as we can and to take measures to draw down as much of the carbon already in the atmosphere as possible. It may already be too late to stop runaway ecological collapse but we don’t know.

Real zero not net zero

This is why Greta Thunberg appealed to world leaders in Davos to stop talking about ‘net zero’ targets and start implementing ‘real zero’ policies. So what does that mean?

‘Net zero’ is a calculation that equates the amount of greenhouse gasses being emitted with an amount of carbon dioxide to be drawn down from the atmosphere at the same time. The greenhouse gasses emitted are then said to be ‘offset’ by the carbon that is captured and stored and therefore those emissions are said to have a neutral or ‘net zero’ effect on global warming. In a best case scenario this carbon-neutral approach to new emissions only stabilises rather than reduces the amount of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere. In the worst case scenario, carbon offsetting is used as a justification for increasing the amount of greenhouse gasses emitted and the carbon capture element of the equation is simply monetised to pay for environmental projects which may or may not involve removing carbon from the atmosphere at all. In this ‘cash for carbon’ scenario, new developments, power stations, airports etc can claim to be ‘zero carbon’ while pumping out vast amounts of greenhouse gasses, so long as they make ‘offset’ payments to cover the cost of reducing emissions somewhere else (often over a very long period of time in the far distant future...). But there is no Planet B, no somewhere else - we need to reduce emissions everywhere. So ‘net zero’ all too often means business as usual for the big polluters while we, as the employees and consumers and citizens, are duped into believing that real action is being taken.

An analogy we could use is the scenario of a morbidly obese man who has been given a matter of months to live if he doesn’t lose weight rapidly. His doctor advises that his first step must be to reduce what he eats to the minimum calories necessary to survive and to burn them off by going to the gym for an hour every day. But the owner of a fast food company convinces the man that he can eat twice as much so long as he goes to the gym for 2 hours a day to offset it. Instead of reducing calories and increasing exercise in order to *lose* weight, the man stays morbidly obese and moves ever closer to the tipping point beyond which he has no chance of recovery. Then it gets worse. An enterprising fitness instructor sells the man a great value yearly gym membership so that he can eat even more and offset it by exercising for as long as he wants every day – but only once the new gym opens next year some time. We might pity a man in this situation, so full of good intentions and so doomed to failure, but when we are thinking about the future of humanity we need to rage against these profiteers who are diverting us from what we need to do to survive. We need to reduce carbon, increase carbon-capture and work towards a society in which all energy comes from non-carbon, renewable sources. In the process we need to stop further ecological destruction and facilitate natural ecosystems to recover and regenerate. Every other solution on offer is a con.

The carbon offsetting con in action

What does it mean when building developments are described as 'zero carbon'? Carbon ratings for new buildings are calculated against a Target CO2 Emission Rate (TER) for a standard building of that size, set by building regulations in 2013. Builders must reduce this emission rate through energy efficiency improvements or renewable energy and then make an offset payment for every remaining ton of carbon likely to be emitted over 30 years in use. This TER covers only regulated emissions - basically heating and lighting - but not emissions from portable appliances like cookers, or IT equipment. It also doesn't include emissions created by actually constructing the new building (or demolishing the buildings that were there before) even though construction and maintenance can account for more than 50% of carbon emitted through the lifetime of a building (Leeds University 2017).

In Southwark, the development in Elephant Park, formerly the Heygate estate, is an example of how misleading 'zero carbon' claims can be. The development was initially touted as a flagship environmental project incorporating a new 100% renewable energy plant. The developer, Lendlease, decided however that this was not financially viable and was permitted by the terms of their planning application to simply convert the carbon reduction targets that would have been achieved through renewable energy, into a recalculated offset payment. The development will now generate just 3% of its energy needs through solar panels and the rest through fossil fuels, but the increased offset payments mean that it is still described as 'zero-carbon'.

If developers can simply choose not to use available technology to reduce emissions in order to boost their profits, then carbon offsetting is really a 'pay to pollute' racket.

The Lendlease offset money has yet to be spent and in all likelihood will be invested in schemes to reduce energy usage in other council owned buildings. A laudable and necessary project to reduce emissions but not one that actually removes existing carbon from the atmosphere.

If what we need is 'real zero' as soon as possible then the fastest way to achieve that is not to build these developments at all. And that is the radical, immediate solution that we must fight for.

But what about homes, jobs and improving people's lives?

Is it really possible or even desirable to *build nothing*? Everything we do involves energy, resources and emissions of some sort. But just like the morbidly obese man who must cut his calories down to the minimum, we have to make choices about what energy use is necessary and what emissions we can cut back straight away. Developments that replace structurally sound buildings are a good place to start.

In Elephant and Castle, hundreds of jobs could be created refurbishing rather than replacing the shopping centre and the LCC university building - with a fraction of the energy, resources or air pollution, let alone the social cost to the community, which a decade of demolitions and rebuilding would lead to. If the social housing that is needed could still be provided in the redevelopment, but not the luxury apartments, would that be such a terrible loss?

Likewise on the Old Kent Road, residents have been presented with a model of 'development for the sake of development' when what we need is regeneration solutions that serve the needs of the existing community and minimise the environmental impact of doing so. We are told we need 20,000 new residential units on the Old Kent Road to make the Bakerloo line extension financially viable. But what if we had the option for a less intrusive, less energy-intensive solution to improve public transport on the Old Kent Road? Such as bus or tram corridors instead of the tube? And then

built less housing but built the low-rise, family friendly social housing that we actually need, instead of 40 storey concrete towers catering to speculative investors.

We will need to offset the emissions that we still expend on vital infrastructure and daily living, but real carbon capture projects such as planting thousands of trees and green roofs would also vastly improve everyone's quality of life. The transition to a zero carbon economy can be a just transition that improves all our standard of living through improvements to public transport, reduced energy costs and cleaner air. If all development plans start from this urgent need to cut emissions and to replenish nature then they will be infinitely more sustainable for our communities as well as for our climate.

Now is the time for residents in Southwark to call a halt to the incessant drive towards over-development that has already wreaked misery on so many in our communities, like in the Heygate and the Aylesbury, as well as driving us into this environmental nightmare. The developers make their millions before the first brick is laid on these projects. They will be long gone when future generations reflect in horror on why we were building skyscrapers while the sea was rising around our feet. The cost of delaying the changes we need to make mounts daily, and it cannot be measured in money.

No More Cash For Carbon.

We need to #RefurbishNotDemolish

Real Zero not Net Zero.