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Towards high-quality net-zero targets

Joeri Rogelj^{1,2}, Andy Reisinger³, Annette Cowie⁴, and Oliver Geden⁵

¹Imperial College London, Grantham Institute, Centre for Environmental Policy, London, UK

²International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, IIASA, Austria

³Ministry for the Environment, Wellington, New Zealand

⁴NSW Department of Primary Industries/University of New England, Armidale, Australia.

⁵German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Germany

With the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015 the world has decided that warming should be kept well below 2°C while pursuing a limit of 1.5°C above preindustrial levels. The Paris Agreement also sets a net emissions reduction goal: in the second half of the century, the balance of global anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and removals should become net zero. Since 2018, in response to the publication of the IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C, a flurry of net zero target announcements has ensued. Many countries, cities, regions, companies, or other organisations have come forward with targets to reach net zero, or become carbon or climate neutral. These labels describe a wide variety of targets, and rarely detailed. Lack of transparency renders it impossible to understand their ultimate contribution towards the global goal. Here we present a set of key criteria that high-quality net zero targets should address. These nine criteria cover emissions, removals, timing, fairness and a long-term vision. Unless net zero targets provide clarity on these nine criteria, we may not know until it is too late whether the collective promise of net zero targets is adequate to meet the global goal of the Paris Agreement.