

From **False Promises** to **Real Solutions**

How to navigate greenwashing
by corporations and governments



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Background

The multiple crises we face, from climate change and biodiversity loss to soil degradation and ecosystem destruction, are being used by big corporations and governments as an opportunity to promote new technologies and market-based instruments that, they say, can help solve them. These corporate-promoted ‘solutions’ however, are designed to maintain the status quo or increase the power and profit of those corporations. Far from solving the problems they claim to address, they make the situation worse. They are also used to persuade governments not to act with the degree of urgency required and to move at the pace set by corporates.

Many of the real solutions needed already exist, they simply need to be implemented on a much wider scale, with proper support and public funding.

Big corporations have been mastering the art of greenwash for decades, even as their activities have seen water sources diminish and become contaminated, soils degraded, air polluted, ecosystems destroyed and communities displaced. Polluting corporations often couch their so-called ‘solutions’ in the language of sustainability, or co-opt terms from grassroots movements, twisting their use to serve their own ends. Some of the concepts they promote might sound appealing, such as “nature-based solutions”, but in reality are closely linked to the corporate capture of food policies and environmental governance.

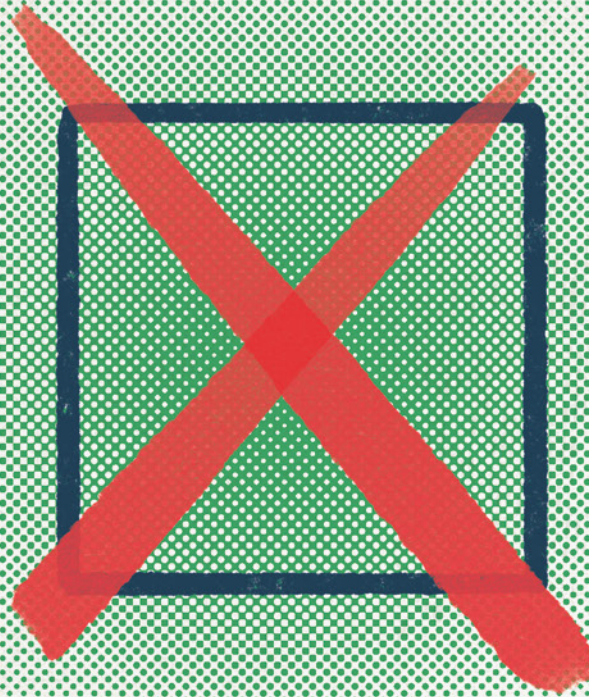
As a result of this greenwashing, governments and other decision makers are buying into a number of corporate false promises, from genetic modification to carbon and biodiversity offsetting, which are promoted as ‘easy fixes’ to complex, systemic problems. Increasingly, policy-makers are supporting and promoting these false promises with favourable policies and public funding – demonstrating what a dangerous distraction they are, and why our campaigning efforts must call them out.

The science is clear: we have a decade to put our world on a course that avoids catastrophic climate change, and reverses the decline of biodiversity. This means we need real solutions to cut carbon emissions at source, to ensure everyone can eat healthy, nutritious food, to protect and restore ecosystems, and to bring people back to the table. We also need business and governments to change their approach to use of land, seas and resources and tighter environmental regulations so that species, habitats and ecosystems stop being eroded and pushed to the edge of extinction.

Many of the real solutions needed already exist – from agroecology and locally-adapted, GMO- and pesticide-free farming methods to community-based renewable energy and an end to fossil fuel extraction – they simply need to be implemented on a much wider scale, with proper support and public funding. The real solutions to the crises we’re facing must, moreover, be embedded within an economy that is life-sustaining and operates within Earth’s limits.

With this guide, we want to ignite the conversation around corporate false promises, and provide tools to help expose and counteract the greenwashing that tries to present them as solutions. Across food, agriculture, climate and biodiversity, comparable tactics are being employed by corporations that want to maintain business as usual and keep profiting from the crises they’ve helped to create, and distract governments from adopting solutions they dislike, or do not control.

The False Promise Checklist set out in this guide can be used to examine the so-called ‘solutions’ being put forward in these different but interconnected areas. The checklist is designed to help to empower people and re-centre the debate to ensure that we put our energy into real solutions, not false promises.



The False Promise Checklist

It's not always easy to wade through the glossy marketing, clever greenwashing and co-opted language used by big corporations and the governments that have bought into their false promises. That's why we've put together a checklist of questions to assess the so-called 'solutions' being presented by corporations and governments, to help expose false promises for what they are.

On the following page, we consider seven of the false promises made by big corporations and governments around food, farming, land management and biodiversity, using the five themes in our False Promise Checklist as a framework.

This is far from a complete list of the false promises that are gaining political traction: there are many others, particularly in the climate and energy sector – such as Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage (CCUS), fossil hydrogen, and geoengineering – which are not covered in this report.

This guidebook should serve as a resource for those who want to understand the greenwashing attempts promoted by agribusiness and governments, help to start internal discussions and engage others in those. It is a tool for awareness raising on the issue and therefore we consider it a living document which can be adapted and developed over time.

FALSE PROMISE CHECKLIST

WHICH ANSWER
MAKES THE FALSE PROMISE
ALARM BELL RING?

PEOPLE



- > Does it empower people to control their own decisions and resources?
- > Are those most affected placed at the centre, and do they benefit from it?
- > Does it strengthen human rights, and peoples' collective rights, land rights, the right to food?
- > Does it address historical injustice, including gender, economic, and racial injustice?

ENVIRONMENT



- > Are ecosystems in better condition?
- > Are ecosystems made more resilient?
- > Are natural resources seen as a commodity?
- > Are natural resources increasingly privatised?

CONSISTENCY and CONTROL



- > Are pollution, carbon emissions, and human rights violations reduced as a result?
- > Is it proposed, marketed or controlled by the private sector?
- > Is it publicly or community owned?
- > Does it tackle only one specific challenge, in isolation?
- > Is it proposed by the same, or similar, actors as those who created the problem it is supposed to address
- > Does it tackle imbalances of power and change the current balance of power?
- > Does it reduce inequalities?

KNOWLEDGE and SKILLS

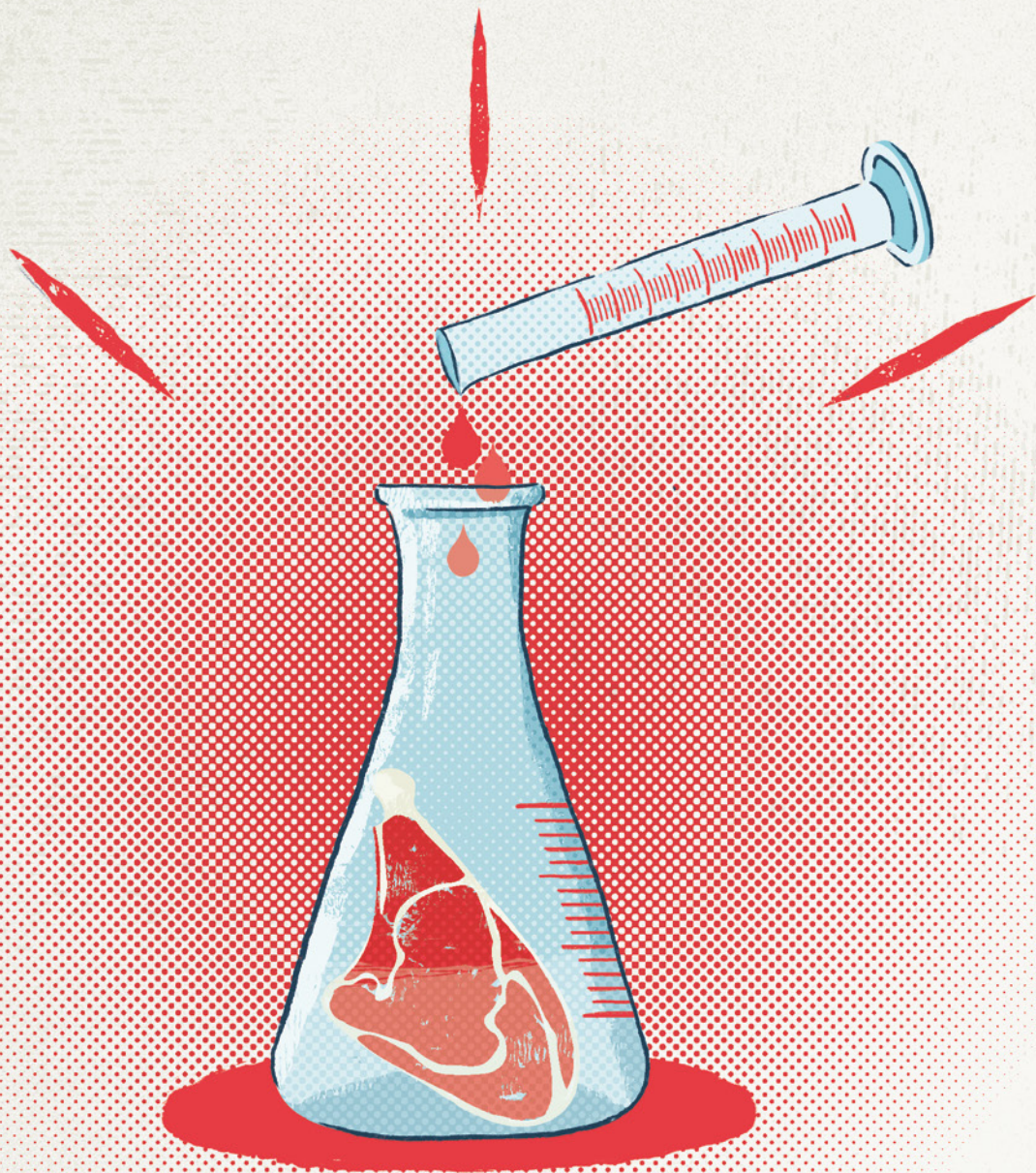


- > Does it build on traditional knowledge, or on the knowledge and experience of those most affected?
- > Is it accessible and supported by those most affected?
- > Is it a technofix designed or promoted by corporations?

LOCAL and DIVERSE

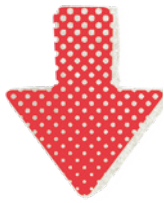


- > Is it adapted to local cultures, situations and needs?
- > Does it propose a uniform solution for complex problems?
- > Does it strengthen local decision-making and grassroots solutions?
- > Does it work with a top-down approach?



Lab meat

Cell-based (or ‘cultured’ or ‘cellular’) meat is an emerging technology that takes certain types of cells from animal muscles and cultivates them in a lab: fed with the right mix of ingredients, these animal cells grow and multiply to produce meat. Companies, investors and start-ups have responded to people’s growing concerns about animal welfare, climate change and meat consumption by developing a hi-tech alternative to factory-farmed meat.



PEOPLE

The main beneficiaries of this technology would be the companies investing in it, and the retailers selling the resulting lab-grown meat. Cell-based meats are capital-intensive, which means they may become highly concentrated in the hands of a few large investors. Funding for this technology has totalled more than \$1 billion since 2013, and current investors in cell-based meat start-ups include some of the world's biggest meat processors and animal-feed firms, such as Tyson and Cargill, as well as billionaires like Bill Gates (Microsoft), Sergey Brin (Google) and Li Ka-shing (CK Hutchison, a Hong Kong conglomerate).



ENVIRONMENT

Recent studies show that producing cell-based meat is very energy-intensive. Taking the whole product life cycle into account, the energy demand is far higher than that of conventional meat production. In this sense it is not a climate-friendly technology. The health aspects of this highly processed food are also unknown.

A shift to eating less and better meat in Europe has a clear climate justification, but it also has an ecological one: extensive (ie the opposite of intensive factory farming) and sustainable livestock farming can help maintain landscapes and protect agrobiodiversity, and can play an important role in agroecological practices that protect ecosystems and livelihoods.



CONSISTENCY and CONTROL

Lab-grown meat does not address the power concentration in the food chain – and risks further concentrating food production. Nor does it really address the problems of factory farming: global meat consumption is on the rise, and it is unclear if lab meat technology would significantly affect the trend of industrialisation of livestock production or contribute to reducing the numbers of animals in factory farms.



KNOWLEDGE and SKILLS

Lab meat could, however, affect the main types of employment associated with meat production: from a system primarily dependent on farmers, farm workers, meat processors and veterinarians to one based on cell biologists, chemists, engineers, and factory and warehouse workers.

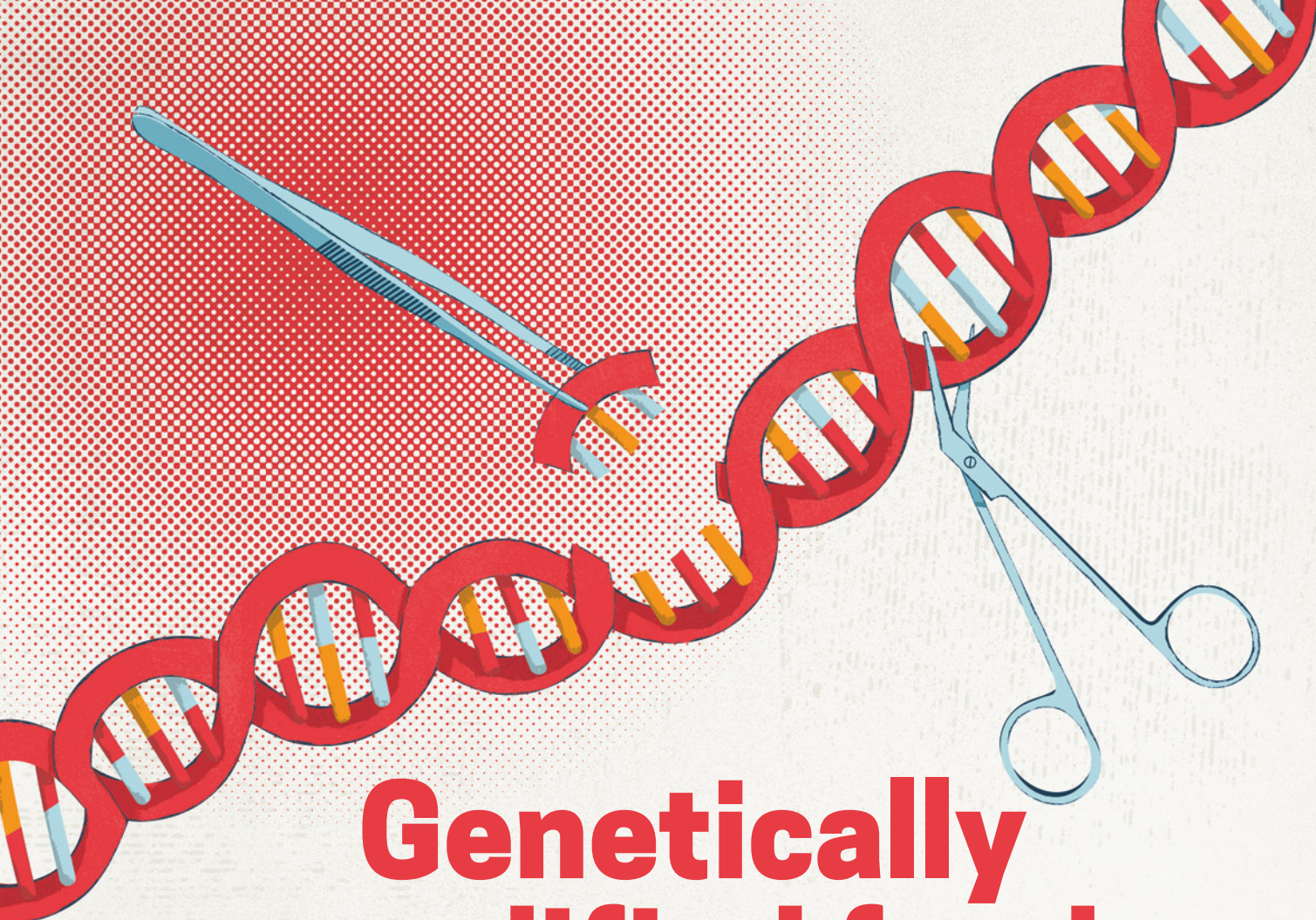


LOCAL and DIVERSE

Lab meat therefore risks shifting food production from fields to labs, and in this way reduces the potential for thriving rural livelihoods and landscapes. It increases disconnection between people and nature, and does not support extensive, integrated and sustainable animal farming. Advocates of lab-grown meat promote the idea that people necessarily damage natural ecosystems, and that animal farming – regardless of the type – is harmful, which can be threatening to rural communities and lifestyles.

Further reading

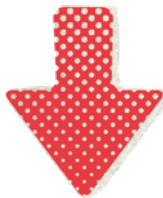
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- > IPES-Food (2022), [The Politics of Protein: Examining claims about livestock, fish, 'alternative proteins' and sustainability](#)
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Genetically modified food the new generation

Genetically modified plants that can survive being sprayed with (or produce their own) toxic chemicals have been grown mainly in the Americas, and some Asian and African countries, for more than 20 years, as part of a highly industrialised farming model. In Europe, however, the uptake of genetically modified food failed completely. But a new generation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is now being promoted by industry in the hope of changing this. Instead of only introducing DNA from other species into the plants, the new method can also modify a plant's genome by using 'scissors' to cut up the plant's existing DNA, for example deleting parts of it, in the hope of developing new characteristics. This new generation of GMOs is once more being promoted as the magic solution for everything from the climate crisis to healthy food.

For some years now, agribusiness giants have been running a global campaign to widely deregulate the new generation of GMOs by renaming the process 'gene editing', 'precision breeding' or 'new genomic techniques', promoting statements from some scientists in the field of biotechnology that they are as natural and safe as any conventional plant (though scientists in fields such as ecology see it differently). Agribusinesses also promote these new GMOs as a solution to multiple problems, for example, claiming that they have better tolerance against diseases, better resilience towards salt or drought, that they can reduce pollution, protect nature and provide healthier food.



PEOPLE

Local communities, peasant farmers, small breeders, food processors and farm workers have not been involved in the problem definition that these new generation GMOs are supposed to fix. On the contrary, with the cultivation of next generation GMOs and their planned deregulation, consumers, peasant farmers and the organic sector are about to lose the right to know whether seed, feed and food contains this new type of GMO. The public and political attention being given to the alleged sustainability of new GMOs – drummed up by the agribusiness companies that will profit from them – distracts from the urgently needed transition to agroecology.



ENVIRONMENT

The highly industrial farming model that GMO cultivation is part of will increase pressure on ecosystems and biodiversity, and is dependent on fossil fuel products like fertilizers and pesticides. In the Americas, the cultivation of existing GMOs has resulted in increased use of pesticides, with detrimental impacts on biodiversity and contamination of water systems. There are, furthermore, still many unanswered questions regarding the potential risks to the environment and ecosystems caused by this new generation of GMO plants.



CONSISTENCY and CONTROL

Like their predecessors, the new generation of GMOs are controlled by agribusiness corporations like Bayer, BASF and Corteva. The new generation, as with existing GMOs, are patented by these companies, which profit hugely from owning and controlling the 'intellectual property' on genetic traits. A painful lesson from the USA is that patented GMO seeds can result in lawsuits against farmers over patent infringements – even when their crops have been accidentally contaminated, or when patented traits have occurred naturally or as a result of conventional breeding.



KNOWLEDGE and SKILLS

The knowledge and practices of local communities, seed savers, peasant farmers and small-scale food producers have helped safeguard crop diversity, whereas GMO technology, however it is rebranded, serves to concentrate the control of seeds – and of particular genetic traits – in the hands of a small handful of agribusiness corporations.



LOCAL and DIVERSE

Biodiversity – and particularly plant genetic diversity, in seeds for agricultural crops – is crucial to our adaptation to climate change and other environmental pressures. Conversely, the increased use of GMOs, controlled by a tiny number of global corporations, reduces this genetic diversity and therefore reduces agricultural resilience, making food production more vulnerable to our changing climate.

Further reading

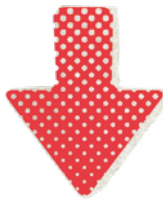
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Carbon offsetting

Carbon offsets are used to compensate for carbon emissions occurring elsewhere. The theory of carbon offsetting is that it is possible to make up for continued emissions of climate changing greenhouse gases by taking action to reduce or avoid emissions elsewhere, or remove carbon from the atmosphere by capturing and storing it in other ways. These different types of offsets range from planting trees to investing in renewable energy projects or paying farmers to store carbon in soils (see carbon farming, below).

Many companies use offsetting to present themselves as climate friendly, even if their whole business model is based on the burning of fossil fuels or emissions-intensive industrial agriculture. Corporations and governments are hiding behind the 'net' in 'net zero' – claiming that they can just pay someone else to compensate for their carbon emissions, through carbon offsetting, instead of taking real action themselves. In other words, by claiming their emissions are being offset somewhere else, it allows companies to continue their unsustainable practices.



PEOPLE

Carbon offset projects are often situated in countries in the Global South, raising concerns about climate justice and equity. Countries from the Global South host projects paid to offset carbon while countries from the Global North can continue to pollute and not make the necessary rapid reductions in emissions at source.

Carbon offset projects can exacerbate existing inequalities. There are many well-documented cases of offsetting projects negatively impacting the livelihoods of local communities, or resulting in their displacement. Documented examples include a private company blocking access to land vital for the livelihoods of local communities in Uganda, in order to claim carbon credits for planting forests, and hydroelectricity projects exacerbating land rights conflicts and damaging biodiversity in Chile and Guatemala.



ENVIRONMENT

Because carbon is the predominant metric of interest for offsets, other environmental effects are neglected. As such, carbon offsets can allow for detrimental projects such as large-scale monoculture tree plantations, hydropower projects or the intensification of industrial agriculture.

Monoculture tree plantations alter and fragment landscapes and damage ecosystems such as grasslands and wetlands, and are therefore a major cause of biodiversity loss. Local communities are displaced to give way to endless rows of identical trees that replace most other forms of life in the area, and alter soil quality, structure and substance. Large quantities of agrochemicals are often used in monoculture plantations, causing considerable contamination and deterioration of soils and watersheds, with serious negative impacts on human health in surrounding populations.

Hydropower projects have very negative impacts on river ecosystems and the surrounding environment. Hydropower dams impede the flow of rivers and thereby affect the habitat of various aquatic lifeforms. They are also a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions: after an area is flooded, the vegetation and soil decompose to release both carbon dioxide and methane.

A recent development in carbon offsets is for the use of feed additives, large-scale biogas or “precision agriculture” that is supposed to reduce nitrous oxide emissions from fertilizer (see Carbon Farming, below). These technofixes, however, do not take into account biodiversity or animal welfare, and block the transition to agroecological food systems. Agricultural offset projects such as these are also often paired with the intensive use of pesticides and herbicides, such as bee-killing glyphosate.

Carbon offsetting furthermore contributes to what is known as the financialisation of nature – by putting a price on ecosystems’ ability to absorb carbon, for example, offsetting turns nature into a financial asset that can be traded on markets, even when the ability of ecosystems to function properly, including to absorb and store carbon has been impaired.



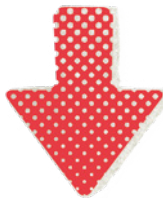
CONSISTENCY and CONTROL

One of the most crucial and unresolvable issues with offsets is that the impact of offset projects is not calculable. Not all carbon offset projects are equally effective at reducing emissions or sequestering carbon from the atmosphere, and most do not lead to any *additional* emissions reductions or sequestration compared to what would have occurred otherwise. This is known as the ‘additionality’ problem. If the offset project would have happened even without the offset funding, then the project was not actually successful.

The significance of this problem cannot be overstated: investigations into Verra, the world’s leading carbon standard for the rapidly growing voluntary offsets market, have found that more than 90% of their rainforest offset credits do not represent any real carbon reductions.

Another key issue is that some carbon offset projects, such as tree planting, rely on the assumption that the carbon stored will remain stored – or ‘sequestered’ – for a long time. However, there are great uncertainties about the permanence of these offsets, as trees can be vulnerable to disease, deforestation, fire, or other factors that could release carbon back into the atmosphere.

Carbon offsetting is, ultimately, an example of a band-aid solution, because it does not address the root causes of carbon emissions and is designed to allow emissions to continue. It distracts attention from the need to eliminate fossil fuel emissions and transform industrial agriculture and forestry, and obscures the responsibility of corporates and elites for their emissions and the resulting impact on the planet, and the responsibility of governments to regulate them.



KNOWLEDGE and SKILLS

While in theory some projects promoted through carbon offsetting could build on traditional knowledges and practices, only very small percentages of climate and biodiversity finance actually reaches Indigenous Peoples and local communities. These communities are often at risk of being evicted from their land and resources to make way for offsetting projects. Meanwhile, the generation of carbon offsets is a profitable business for many actors in the middle of the value chain, who calculate, trade and validate the offsets.

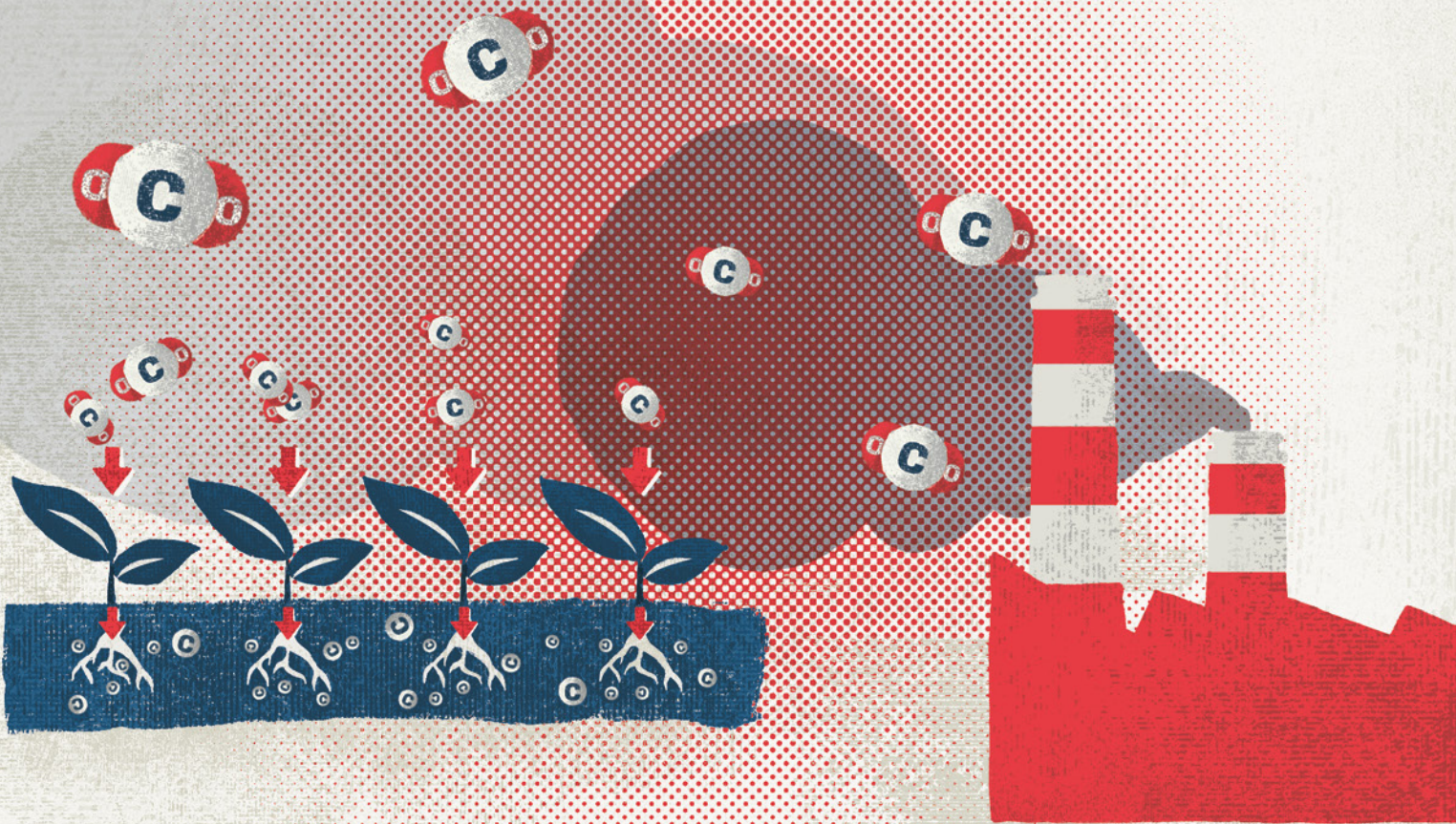


LOCAL and DIVERSE

Similarly, while some offset projects could be adapted to local cultures and local situations, they are mostly promoted by actors that work with a top-down approach and often result in very detrimental impacts on local populations.

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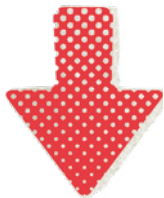
Carbon Farming



One type of carbon offset that is increasingly popular is carbon farming. The idea behind carbon farming is simple: pay farmers for storing - or 'sequestering' - carbon (or more broadly, for reducing emissions). In reality, carbon farming enables the creation of offsets that allow companies to keep on polluting, while hiding behind greenwash and false net zero claims.

The term carbon farming mostly appears in the political debate as a way to describe a range of practices intended to sequester carbon or reduce emissions. Despite the term including "farming", the concept covers a range of practices that are meant to sequester carbon in soils, or vegetation, in agriculture and forestry, or to reduce methane or nitrous oxide emissions on farms (see carbon offsetting, above). It is presented as a way to reduce agricultural emissions and incentivise an increase in land sinks (ie carbon stored in the land). The term is often brought up in relation to results-based payments, which, especially in the private sector, relate directly to carbon offsets. In other words, carbon farming projects can be used to generate carbon offsets (see above).

A number of carbon farming initiatives already exist, including in France, Australia, the US and the UK, and several companies, such as pesticide giants Bayer and Yara, have developed their own carbon farming schemes. The European Commission recently proposed a Carbon Removal Certification Framework, which includes carbon farming; if this proposal passes, it would provide big corporations with a new opportunity to promote and expand their offset markets.



PEOPLE

Small farmers are unlikely to benefit directly from carbon farming schemes; the high burden to proof required to partake in the schemes means they will likely only benefit large farms and industrial scale agriculture.

Carbon markets, where carbon offset credits (from offset schemes like carbon farming) can be traded, are threatening small-scale farmers in another way, by affecting land prices, and in turn leading to land speculation and land-grabbing from small-scale farmers and peasants. In places where such schemes exist, such as Scotland and Australia, rising land prices are already being observed.



ENVIRONMENT

By focusing solely on carbon, carbon farming can incentivise practices that do not have multiple benefits, for example, for farmers, biodiversity, water retention and soil health, as well as for the climate. A carbon-only focus can lead to monoculture plantations or quick fixes, rather than looking at the system as a whole. There are also significant concerns about the feasibility and permanence of soil carbon sequestration as a climate mitigation instrument.

Carbon farming is part of the financialisation of nature, whereby carbon is commodified and sold in the form of carbon offset credits. Carbon markets' reliance on costly intermediaries, such as brokers, exchanges, and resellers, also raises concerns about the cost of using such markets to raise finance for climate mitigation projects.



CONSISTENCY and CONTROL

Carbon farming schemes are usually set up and promoted by the same corporations that sell agricultural inputs like chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and seeds. Carbon farming does not, therefore, address the balance of power in the food system, but instead ensures even more profits for those companies.

The world's largest agribusinesses, including Bayer, Yara, Cargill and Corteva, have been launching their own carbon farming payment programs, which depend heavily on the use of their own technologies. This allows these corporate giants to define what counts as carbon farming practices, capture valuable farmer data, and promote the use of their products in yet more destructive, chemical-intensive monocultures.

Offset schemes distract from real solutions, and risk shifting public subsidies from agroecology to carbon farming. This approach fails to truly address the climate crisis, while enabling big corporations to further entrench their market power and greenwash their operations.



KNOWLEDGE and SKILLS

Rather than being informed by traditional knowledge, carbon farming schemes are likely to accelerate the loss of traditional agricultural knowledge by locking farmers into contracts dictating what counts as carbon farming practices.

What's more, existing agroecological farms – ie farms that are already sustainable and non-carbon-intensive – are not attractive to, or rewarded by, carbon farming schemes, as investors look for 'additionality' from their offsets (ie that the carbon would not have been sequestered without the offset scheme).



LOCAL and DIVERSE

Carbon farming is a top-down approach that fails to take into consideration the specificity of local conditions. The monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) protocols used for the certification of carbon credits, and the impacts these have on farmers, are also decided top-down.

Finally, carbon farming approaches tend to consider positive environmental and social impacts only as "co-benefits" to carbon storage. However, the myriad non-climate-related environmental, social and economic benefits of sustainable farming practices are already more than enough reason to incentivise environmentally-friendly farming practices that are good for the climate.



Further reading

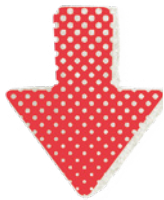
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Biodiversity offsetting

The idea behind biodiversity offsetting is that harm to biodiversity in one area (for example, due to a new road, a mine, building development, or other economic activity) can be compensated for by improving conditions or providing protections elsewhere. There are two main types of biodiversity offsetting: protecting something which would otherwise (hypothetically) be destroyed, or restoring degraded habitats and ecosystems.

As with net zero climate targets, which use the 'net' in net zero to allow big polluters to keep polluting, biodiversity offsetting is hidden behind concepts like 'Net Gain', 'No Net Loss' and 'Nature Positive', terms that are becoming increasingly popular in biodiversity conservation. These terms remain poorly defined, and tend to be used as a marketing tool rather than result in genuine changes in how biodiversity and ecosystems are protected, restored and treated. 'Nature Positive' is one of the latest example of marketing of a catchy name and concept which is unlikely to be any different from other flawed offsetting and net gain approaches.



PEOPLE

Similarly to carbon offsetting, the social impact of biodiversity offsetting is considerable, especially for Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and marginalised groups. Human rights abuses are frequent, with these groups frequently getting moved off their historic lands or losing access to resources to make way for biodiversity offsetting projects.



ENVIRONMENT

Past experiences of offsetting biodiversity loss have mostly been unsuccessful. The problems with restoring degraded ecosystems as a type of offsetting are manifold. Recreating or restoring ecosystems to their former state is often not feasible within reasonable timeframes, or is prohibitively costly. To date, complex ecosystems such as primary forests and peatlands have not been wholly restored anywhere, in a fully satisfactory way. Ecosystem restoration in itself can, of course, be a good thing, but only as long as it comes in addition to, and not instead of, curbing ecosystem destruction. Because the two things are not comparable.

The main failing of the other type of offset, which involves protecting something which would otherwise (hypothetically) be destroyed, is that the biodiversity 'gains' rely on the unknown probability of biodiversity loss at the offset site in the absence of additional protection. So, while the immediate biodiversity loss from the new road, mine or other development is certain, it is very much uncertain that biodiversity in the offset area would have been lost if not for the offset credit being purchased.

Like carbon offsetting, biodiversity offsetting contributes to the financialisation of nature by turning biodiversity into a financial asset to be traded on markets.



CONSISTENCY and CONTROL

By definition, biodiversity offsetting is not about curbing destruction, but – at best – displacing it somewhere else. And as with carbon offsetting, it often causes harm to communities living in or close to offset areas.



KNOWLEDGE and SKILLS

Very few offsetting projects build on traditional knowledge, and only very small percentages of climate and biodiversity finance reach Indigenous Peoples and local communities despite their major role in the conservation of biodiversity. These communities are often at risk of being evicted from their land and resources to make way for offsetting projects. Often, there is an assumption that Indigenous Peoples and local communities living in certain areas are a threat to the ecosystem, when the evidence shows that 80% of valuable ecosystems are being conserved by these groups, and that once they are excluded from a territory, it is left much more exposed to other economic influences, or corruption.



LOCAL and DIVERSE

Biodiversity offsetting fails to account for the loss of ecosystem functions and the benefits they provide to people. It assumes that one type of ecosystem, species, or even sacred ground for Indigenous Peoples, can be compensated by others, ignoring each of their uniqueness.

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- > Counter Balance and Re:Common (2017), [Biodiversity Offsetting: A threat for life](#)
- > Global Forest Coalition (2021), [Corporate contagion: How the private sector is capturing the UN Food, Biodiversity and Climate Summits](#)
- > Friends of the Earth International (2021), [No net loss of biodiversity: a false solution and more destruction](#)
- > Friends of the Earth EWNI (2021), [A dangerous distraction – the offsetting con](#)
- > Friends of the Earth International, Global Forest Coalition, Corporate Europe Observatory (2021), [The Big Con: How Big Polluters are advancing a "net zero" climate agenda to delay, deceive, and deny](#)
- > IISD (2022), [Climate Finance Needs Rethinking to Reach Indigenous Peoples on the Ground](#)

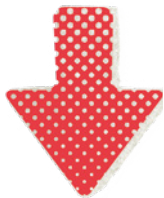


Nature-based Solutions

The concept of nature-based solutions (NbS) has become popular in the international conservation sector. It is increasingly used as an umbrella term covering a range of schemes for climate and biodiversity protection, including anything from planting trees and restoring and protecting mangroves, wetlands and peat-lands, to increasing carbon storage in agricultural soils (see carbon farming, above). Crucially, however, NbS are being used by big companies and governments as a loophole to keep on polluting and perpetuating damage to ecosystems, and to delay proper action to cut emissions and curb biodiversity loss.

NbS schemes are said to attract private finance – but private finance only emerges if corporations are offered either permission to maintain their polluting and destructive business models or an opportunity to profit, which will only happen through offsetting. NbS are therefore unlikely to happen without offsetting, as their appeal resides precisely in their ‘cost-effectiveness’ compared to actually curbing emissions or environmental destruction, as well as in their ability to provide business opportunities.

In effect, ‘nature-based solutions’ is one of the new names being given to carbon and biodiversity offsetting. The re-branding of some long-standing and positive conservation projects (that are not offsets) as NbS is also being used to give legitimacy to the NbS-offset concept as a whole.



PEOPLE

As with biodiversity and carbon offsetting projects, some projects that fall under the umbrella of NbS can lead to human rights violations, especially of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, peasants and other rural communities, particularly in the Global South. The promotion and sale of NbS has, for example, led to a boom in plantation forestry, often at the expense of other natural habitats and local communities.



ENVIRONMENT

One of the big issues with the concept of NbS is that its definition is very vague. What passes as NbS can include actions that are counter-productive for the environment, such as monoculture tree plantations, so-called “sustainable intensification” of farming (with heavy reliance on petrochemical inputs), and new genetic modification technologies.

It is also an illusion to think we can depend on nature to absorb all of our emissions. Natural ecosystems can only absorb so much carbon, and there is evidence that some habitats are already overloaded. Some studies even show that habitats ranging from permafrosts to the Amazon rainforest are under so much stress due to the climate crisis that they are changing from being stores of carbon to sources of carbon.

Like carbon and biodiversity offsetting, NbS contribute to the financialisation of nature by turning biodiversity and ecosystems into a financial asset.



CONSISTENCY and CONTROL

Although it might sound attractive, the concept of NbS distracts from the real causes of the crises we face today, and the crucial need to drastically cut carbon emissions and properly protect and restore biodiversity. NbS instrumentalise nature as a so-called solution without defining the problem or acknowledging who created it. NbS are likely to make matters worse by perpetuating inequality and increasing corporate power.

Already, NbS are being used by corporations to provide them with a new form of greenwashing. Many fossil fuel companies and agribusinesses claim to be investing in NbS while at the same time expanding their destructive practices, failing to cut their emissions at source and failing to reduce their material footprint.



KNOWLEDGE and SKILLS

While some NbS projects could, in theory, build on traditional knowledge, only very small percentages of climate and biodiversity finance actually reach Indigenous Peoples and local communities. What tends to happen is that the knowledge of traditional communities gets excluded, along with their ways of relating to nature that are not governed by profit.

Global networks comprising Indigenous Peoples and local community organizations, such as the World Rainforest Movement and the Indigenous Environmental Network, have collectively denounced NbS as a false solution to the climate and biodiversity crises.

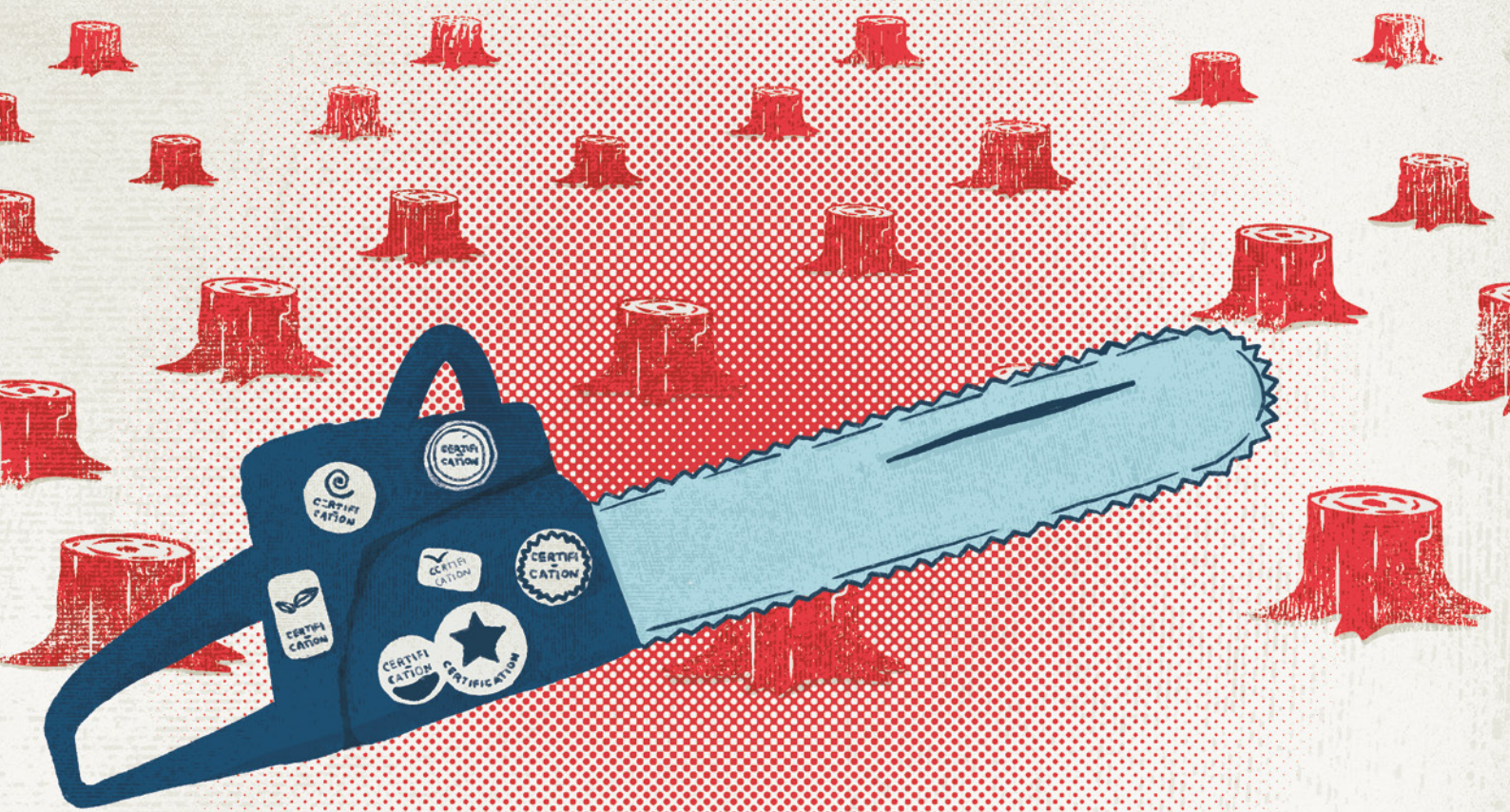


LOCAL and DIVERSE

While some NbS projects could be adapted to local cultures and local situations, the overarching issue is that they are mainly promoted by actors that work with a top-down approach, seeking uniform solutions and easy fixes to the biodiversity and climate emergencies.

Further reading

- > [Third World Network \(2021\), “Nature-based Solutions” and the Biodiversity and Climate Crises](#)
- > [Friends of the Earth International \(2021\), Nature Based Solutions: A wolf in sheep’s clothing](#)
- > [Friends of the Earth International \(2023\), Factsheets: ‘nature based solutions’ and soil carbon farming](#)
- > [Friends of the Earth International \(2023\), Toolkit for fighting climate false solutions](#)
- > [250+ civil society groups \(2021\), No to Nature-Based Solutions Dispossessions!](#)
- > [Yale School of the Environment \(2020\), Why ‘Carbon-Cycle Feedbacks’ Could Drive Temperatures Even Higher](#)
- > See also further reading for carbon offsetting and biodiversity offsetting sections.



Deforestation-free certification

Many companies that sell Forest and Ecosystem Risk Commodities (FERCs), such as soy, palm oil, cocoa, coffee, and biofuels, use certification as a way to convince consumers that they are making an effort to address complex environmental challenges like deforestation, and to improve their environmental and social performance on the ground.

Certification schemes include the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil / Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO/MSPO), the Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS), Fairtrade, and Rainforest Alliance/UTZ. And in many of these cases, products get certified despite being produced in ways that cause deep harm to planet and people. Yet de-certification remains extremely rare, thanks to certifiers often being paid directly by the companies who get certified.



Further reading

- > NGO Statement (2022), [Ten reasons why certification should not be promoted in the EU anti-deforestation regulation](#)
- > Greenpeace (2021), [Destruction: Certified](#)
- > Friends of the Earth Netherlands (2021), [Palm Oil Certification: Not 'Out of the Woods'](#)
- > The Guardian (2021), [Fifth of Indonesia's palm oil sites lie in forest estate, says Greenpeace](#)



PEOPLE

Many deforestation-free certification schemes have been found to promote the expansion of industrial agriculture and logging, and thereby prevent the transition needed to halt deforestation: towards community-based forest management and agroecology with food sovereignty as a leading principle.

The voluntary nature of certification, and the resulting limitations around auditing, for example, means that certification cannot guarantee Free, Prior and Informed Consent, prevent land grabbing of indigenous land, or otherwise identify and address adverse impacts on people. Certification audits have extremely limited time for community consultation, are dominated by company evidence, and only speak with a selection of communities or groups in communities. Their independence is compromised by the fact that the company pays the auditor. And problematic areas, with conflicts or deforestation, can be kept out of the scope of certification as the company will still receive a certificate for those areas that fulfil the standard.



ENVIRONMENT

Certification schemes do not address the root causes of deforestation, e.g. to reduce the demand for agricultural and forestry commodities; this demand has continued to grow even as certification schemes have proliferated, thereby increasing pressure on land and risking driving further deforestation and destruction of ecosystems. Numerous studies have concluded that certification on its own has not helped companies meet their commitments to exclude deforestation from their supply chains.

Conservation NGOs with interests in certification increasingly recognize the failure of certification schemes to halt deforestation. The biodiversity impact of certification is at best unclear, and not measured in robust and transparent way, and many schemes permit nature can be destroyed and compensated for elsewhere. Certification also provides opportunities for greenwashing, and can increase corporate control and power over natural resources.



CONSISTENCY and CONTROL

The fact that certification is predominantly a marketing tool means that the main incentive for companies to meet environmental and social standards is the reward of increased market access and sales, rather than the 'sustainable' production of products. What's more, the proliferation of industry-led voluntary certification standards has led states to buy in to the idea that regulating companies is no longer their responsibility, as it is consumers who will choose the right approach based on the information they're provided with.

Certification, therefore, shifts responsibility onto consumers to understand the claims made by certified products, an evaluation that in many cases consumers cannot reasonably be expected to make. At the same time, more environmentally-sound products are more often expensive, and mainly accessible to the better off and middle classes in the Global North. This can push blame or guilt onto anybody who cannot access or afford such products – when in fact, it is the wider structures that need to change.

Certification schemes are voluntary, and so do not have the authority to monitor or enforce compliance with national laws, which is why they cannot tackle issues like deforestation. Certified wood linked to illegal logging operations in Russia is reaching European supply chains. And the RSPO, for example, has explicitly stated that its standards are voluntary and that they “do not extend to enforcing or confirming the legal standing of a company's use of land (which is a mandate only held by the national authority)”.



KNOWLEDGE and SKILLS and LOCAL and DIVERSE

Certification schemes can differ significantly from one another, with some being entirely top-down and corporate-led, and others having better governance models that incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives, more rigorous standards, and better monitoring of company implementation. Even in the better examples, however, certification promotes the idea that 'sustainability' is a consumer choice rather than a requirement of an economic system that should be structured in a way that respects traditional knowledge and grassroots solutions.

Complaints systems in certification schemes are weak, with complaints hardly ever leading to compensation and redress for affected communities.







What are real solutions?

Friends of the Earth Europe is committed to supporting real solutions for system change. Solutions that are embedded in an economy and society that satisfy the basic needs and wellbeing of all, within ecological limits.

An economy based on the following transformational principles:

-  **An economy within Earth's limits:** we need a life-sustaining economy, ending Europe's over-exploitation of resources beyond the Earth's capacity to regenerate. An altogether different way of producing and consuming.
-  **A truly democratic and participative economy:** a new economy is a broader and more ambitious project of handing power back to citizens and re-placing the economic sphere under public scrutiny.
-  **A public future:** our vision is of an economy that meets the basic needs of everyone, through publicly- and common-owned and managed services and infrastructure, and without growth and profit motives.
-  **Rethinking work:** its centrality in society, the definitions, scope, and value of different types of work – gives the potential to imagine a society liberated from, and emancipated in, wage work.
-  **The role of businesses:** we need fundamentally different businesses and companies, both in terms of purpose and organisation – businesses that are smaller in size and power, that are collectively managed, that are for purpose not profit.
-  **Trade, solidarity and international relations:** Europe needs to become a truly fair global economic player. To stop its unfair trade relations and move towards less and more localised trade, and to end financial debt towards Global South countries.
-  **Values we want in a new economy and society:** a new economy must embody and enact the core values of sufficiency, care and empathy, equality and inclusiveness, and autonomy.

A transformed economy goes hand in hand with the transformation of our food systems towards food sovereignty and agroecology. We must transform our relationship with food, energy and economies, which are all part of the path towards systemic transformation. But to get there, we need to be able to navigate from the false promises of corporations and governments to the real solutions that ensure social and biodiversity protection and the right to healthy, culturally appropriate food for all.

~~False promises~~

→ Real solutions



Lab meat



In the context of animal farming, a just transition towards food sovereignty in Europe means moving away from intensive factory farming towards more sustainable, extensive animal farming, with a more localised food and feed chain. This also requires a shift towards less and better meat consumption in Europe, with fair prices for producers, improved working conditions and accessible prices for quality products for consumers.



GMOs



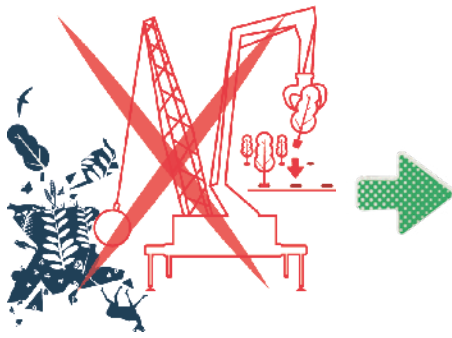
Corporate-controlled technofixes falsely promise to solve complex problems with 'simple' solutions, but the only effective and lasting way to reduce pesticide use and ensure food production under extreme weather conditions is system change. Thankfully, agroecological and organic farming practices *already* work to drastically cut emissions, build crop resilience, stabilise yields, protect biodiversity and create fairer conditions for food producers. They are practices that have worked for centuries and can continue to work in the future. That is why we must support peasant, family farmers, fisherfolk and other small-scale producers to transition to agroecological food systems.



Carbon offsetting
and
Carbon farming



All businesses and sectors of the economy need to cut their emissions at source, instead of passing the buck via the greenwashed fiction of 'offsetting'. Polluting and corporate controlled-energy production should be replaced by energy sufficiency and 100% renewable energy – with community and social ownership – for all. And rather than allowing agribusinesses' carbon farming schemes to increase corporate control of the food chain, the focus should be on bottom-up research support for food producing communities.



Biodiversity offsetting

Biodiversity and ecosystems need proper protection, conservation and restoration in their own right. Biodiversity destroyed in one place cannot be compensated for in another, which is why we need legal recognition of areas in which no corporate economic activity may take place – without the option for those areas to be counted as ‘offsets’, or for activity in those areas to be ‘offset’ elsewhere. The role of Indigenous Peoples and local communities should be strengthened, including in the decision making processes around such areas, with recognition of the traditional activities of local populations that are in accordance with the needs of the ecosystem. Policies to promote community forest management are also needed.



Nature-based Solutions

Natural ecosystems can play a role in helping to avoid dangerous climate change, but they need to be protected irrespective of whether it helps with climate change mitigation. We must grant rights, access and control over land, territories, seeds, water and biodiversity to local communities, peasants, family farmers, cooperatives and small-scale food production and distribution.



Deforestation-free certification

Corporate-led and voluntary certification that makes ‘sustainability’ into a consumer choice must be replaced with government-defined regulations and oversight, with severe sanctions for environmental and social claims that are found to be false. There should be guarantees of fair incomes for producers, workers’ rights and decent working and living conditions. At the same time, we need to put a stop to agribusiness expansion and neoliberal trade and investment policies, and ensure gender justice is at the heart of a feminist care economy, a feminist just transition and food sovereignty.

Further reading

- > Friends of the Earth Europe (2022), [New year, new economy?](#)
- > Friends of the Earth Europe (2022), [7 Sparks to Light a New Economy: Transformational ideas for a life-sustaining economy within Earth's limits](#)
- > Friends of the Earth International (2023), [Transform - How we're making deep and lasting change: Friends of the Earth International's pathways to system change](#)

Rather than entrenching the power of corporate actors by buying into their false promises, **Friends of the Earth Europe is committed to promoting integrated and transformational solutions to the multiple crises we face** – solutions that range from supporting agroecology and locally-adapted, GMO- and pesticide-free farming methods to stopping fossil fuel extraction and supporting community-based renewable energy.

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