



Save the world, ignore global warming

By Bjorn Lomborg

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Global warming has become the obsession of our time. From governments and campaigners meeting for the climate summit in Buenos Aires right now we hear the incessant admonition: making global warming our first priority is the moral test of our age.

Yet they are wrong. Global warming is real and caused by CO2. The trouble is that the climate models show we can do very little about the warming. Even if everyone (including the United States) did Kyoto and stuck to it throughout the century, the change would be almost immeasurable, postponing warming by just six years in 2100.

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Likewise, the economic models tell us that the cost is substantial. The cost of Kyoto compliance is at least \$150billion a year. For comparison, the UN estimates that half that amount could permanently solve the most pressing humanitarian problems in the world: it could buy clean drinking water, sanitation, basic health care and education to every single person in the world.

Global warming will mainly harm the developing countries, because they are poorer and therefore less able to handle climate changes. However, even the most pessimistic forecasts from the UN expect the average person in the developing countries to be richer in 2100 than we are now.

So action on global warming is basically a very costly way of doing very little for much richer people far into the future. We need to ask ourselves if this indeed should be our first priority.

Of course, in the best of all worlds, we would not need to prioritise. We could do all good things. We could win the war against hunger, end conflicts, stop communicable diseases, provide clean drinking, step up education and halt climate change. But we don't. And we have to ask the hard question: If we don't do it all, what should we do first?

Some of the world's top economists – including three Nobel Laureates – answered this question at the

Copenhagen Consensus last May, prioritising all the major requirements for improving the world. They found that dealing with HIV/Aids, hunger, free trade and malaria were the world's top priorities. This was where we could do the most good for our dollar. Equally, the experts rated urgent responses to climate change at the bottom. In fact, the panel called these ventures – including Kyoto – "bad projects", simply because they cost more than the good they do.

The Copenhagen Consensus gives us great hope because it shows us that there are so many good things we can do. For \$27 billion we could prevent 28 million people from getting HIV. For \$12 billion we could cut malaria cases by more than a billion a year. Instead of helping richer people inefficiently far into the future, we can do immense good right now.

We live in a world with limited resources, where we struggle to solve just some of its challenges. This means that caring more about some issues end up meaning caring less about others. If we have a moral obligation, it is to spend each dollar doing the most good that we possibly can.

So in a curious way, global warming really is the moral test of our time, but not in the way its proponents imagined. We need to stop our obsession with global warming, and start dealing with the many more pressing issues in the world, where we can do most good first and quickest.

Bjørn Lomborg is associate professor in political science at the University of Aarhus, and author of *Global Crises*, *Global Solutions* and *The Skeptical Environmentalist*.

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