

Time for a Smarter Approach to Global Warming

Investing in energy R&D might work. Mandated emissions cuts won't.

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Copenhagen

The saddest fact of climate change—and the chief reason we should be concerned about finding a proper response—is that the countries it will hit hardest are already among the poorest and most long-suffering.

In the run-up to this month's global climate summit in Copenhagen, the Copenhagen Consensus Center dispatched researchers to the world's most likely global-warming hot spots. Their assignment: to ask locals to tell us their views about the problems they face. Over the past seven weeks, I recounted in these pages what they told us concerned them the most. In nearly every case, it wasn't global warming.

Everywhere we went we found people who spoke powerfully of the need to focus more attention on more immediate problems. In the Bauleni slum compound in Lusaka, Zambia, 27-year-old Samson Banda asked, "If I die from malaria tomorrow, why should I care about global warming?" In a camp for stateless Biharis in Bangladesh, 45-year-old Momota Begum said, "When my kids haven't got enough to eat, I don't think global warming will be an issue I will be thinking about." On the southeast slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, 45-year-old widow and HIV/AIDS sufferer Mary Thomas said she had noticed changes in the mountain's glaciers, but declared: "There is no need for ice on the mountain if there is no people around because of HIV/AIDS."

There is no question that global warming will have a significant impact on already existing problems such as malaria, malnutrition, and water shortages. But this doesn't mean the best way to solve them is to cut carbon emissions.

Take malaria. Most estimates suggest that if nothing is done, 3% more of the Earth's population will be at risk of infection by 2100. The most efficient global carbon cuts designed to keep average global temperatures from rising any higher than two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels (a plan proposed by the industrialized G-8 nations) would cost the world \$40 trillion a year in lost economic growth by 2100—and have only a marginal impact on reducing the at-risk malaria population. By contrast, we could spend \$3 billion a year on mosquito nets, environmentally safe indoor DDT sprays, and subsidies for new therapies—and within 10 years cut the number of malaria infections by half. In other words, for the money it would take to save one life with carbon cuts, smarter policies could save 78,000 lives.

Many well-meaning people argue that we do not need to choose between tackling climate change and addressing these more immediate problems directly. We can, they say, do both. If only that were true. Just last week, activists from the international aid agency Oxfam reported evidence that European countries were planning to "cannibalize" existing development aid budgets and repackage them as climate-change assistance. According to Oxfam, if rich nations diverted \$50 billion to

climate change, at least 4.5 million children could die and 8.6 million fewer people could have access to HIV/AIDS treatment. And what would we get for that \$50 billion? Well, spending that much on Kyoto-style carbon-emissions cuts would reduce temperatures by all of one-thousandth of one degree Fahrenheit over the next hundred years.

Money spent on carbon cuts is money we can't use for effective investments in food aid, micronutrients, HIV/Aids prevention, health and education infrastructure, and clean water and sanitation. This does not mean that we should ignore global warming. But it does raise serious questions about our dogmatic pursuit of a strategy that can only be described as breathtakingly expensive and woefully ineffective.

As I write this in the Bella Center in Copenhagen, I am surrounded by delegates, politicians and activists engaged in negotiating a successor to the Kyoto Protocol. Almost every one of them is singing from the same hymn-book: The world's nations must commit themselves to drastic, immediate carbon cuts if we are to avoid the worst of global warming.

The tune may be seductive, but the lyrics don't make any sense. Even if every major government were to slap huge taxes on carbon fuels—which is not going to happen—it wouldn't do much to halt climate change any time soon. What it would do is cost us hundreds of billions—if not trillions—of dollars, because alternative energy technologies are not yet ready to take up the slack.

Over the last several centuries, the world economy has exploded and the human condition has improved immeasurably because of cheap fossil fuels; we're not going to end that connection in just a few decades. Just before the summit convened, political leaders from a number of major nations were lauded for announcing carbon-reduction targets that are in fact economically, technically, and politically impossible to achieve. We saw the same thing at the 1992 "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro and then again a decade later in Kyoto. And just like the promises made back then, the vows being made now in Copenhagen are sure to be broken by future administrations. Pretending otherwise is fraudulent.

There was one positive sign in Copenhagen last week. Someone leaked a draft text of a proposed climate agreement that would break away from the deeply flawed Kyoto model (which exempted the developing world from having to promise anything) and compel both rich and poor nations alike to agree to specific carbon cuts. The leak caused great dissension and infighting among delegates, reflecting a realization—at last—that cutting carbon emissions is not going to be easy.

Of course, I would like to see the politicians move even further away from the Kyoto approach. Instead of making far-fetched promises about greenhouse gases, how about a concrete commitment to green energy research and development? Specifically, we should radically increase spending on R&D for green energy—to 0.2% of global GDP, or \$100 billion. That's 50 times more than the world spends now—but still twice as cheap as Kyoto. Not only would this be both affordable and politically achievable, but it would also have a real chance of working.

In order to make this kind of shift, leaders will have to stop papering over a consistent record of failure and instead recognize that the Kyoto approach is going nowhere. In this sense, the likely failure of the Copenhagen summit could end up being a blessing in disguise. If we are serious about helping the world's worst-off inhabitants, we are going to need to rethink our approach completely.

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