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From Copenhagen's ashes, a better way to fight global warming

By Bjørn Lomborg

COPENHAGEN -- Even though no one should have been surprised by the outcome of last month's global climate summit in Copenhagen, the lack of any meaningful action unleashed a torrent of angry and disappointed rhetoric. "The outcome of Copenhagen doesn't at all match the needs . . . of mankind," complained Sweden's environment minister. "By delaying action, rich countries have condemned millions of the world's poorest people to hunger, suffering and loss of life," added Nnimmo Bassey, chair of Friends of the Earth International. And those were some of the milder comments.

Critics, however, should calm down. If anything, the summiteers did the planet a favor by refusing to endorse a binding agreement to drastically reduce carbon emissions. That's because their inability to make progress may be the nudge the international community needs to face the real inconvenient truth: that after nearly two decades of fruitless efforts, it's time to give up our Rio-Kyoto-Copenhagen fantasy and get real about combating global warming.

Two points underlie the issue of global warming: First, developing nations have no intention of letting the developed world force them to stop using carbon-emitting fuels. They are understandably wary of any policy that might curtail the domestic economic growth that is allowing their populations to clamber out of poverty. And that is precisely what drastically reducing their carbon emissions would do.

Second, even for more-developed economies, trying to force drastic cuts in carbon emissions makes no economic sense. All the major climate economic models show that to achieve the much-discussed goal of keeping temperature increases under 2 degrees Celsius, we would need a global tax on carbon emissions that would start at \$102 per ton (or about 90 cents per gallon of gasoline) -- and increase to \$4,000 per ton (or \$35.51 per gallon of gasoline) by the end of the century. In all, this would cost the world \$40 trillion *a year*. Most mainstream calculations conclude that this is 50 times more expensive than the climate damage it seeks to prevent.

In other words, trying to force cuts in carbon emissions is a solution that will cost far more than the problem it is meant to solve. No wonder this option never gained real traction.

So what do we do? Given that global energy demand is expected to double by 2050, the only way to reduce (if not eliminate) our use of fossil fuels without crippling the world economy is to radically ramp up green-energy technologies -- to the point where we can increase our reliance on them by several orders of magnitude. For two decades we have been putting the cart before the horse,

pretending that we could cut carbon emissions now and solve the technology problem later. It's time to turn things around. Instead of condemning billions of people to continued poverty by trying to make fossil fuels more expensive, we should make green energy cheaper. This means radically increasing spending on research and development.

In a paper for the Copenhagen Consensus Center last July, Isabel Galiana and Prof. Chris Green of McGill University examined the state of non-carbon-based energy -- including nuclear, wind, solar and geothermal power -- and came to some disconcerting conclusions. Based on current rates of progress, they found that by 2050 our array of alternative energy sources would produce less than half the power we would need from them to be able to stabilize carbon emissions. By 2100, the gap would be even wider. The technology is simply not progressing fast enough in terms of scalability or stability. This should not be surprising. In many areas, there is still a need for the most basic research and development. We are not even close to getting the needed technological revolution started.

But we could be. Devoting just 0.2 percent of global gross domestic product -- roughly \$100 billion (70 billion euros) a year -- to green energy R&D would produce the kind of game-changing breakthroughs needed to fuel a carbon-free future. Not only would this be a much less expensive fix than trying to cut carbon emissions, it would also reduce global warming far more quickly.

So let's be grateful that the Copenhagen summiteers were unable to paper over their differences. Their failure should be our wake-up call. After 20 years of getting nowhere, it's time to take a fresh look at the problem and adopt a different approach.

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