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We should change tack on climate after Copenhagen

By Bjørn Lomborg

After 12 days of protests, posturing and seemingly endless palaver, the elephantine gathering that was the Copenhagen climate summit has laboured mightily and brought forth ... a mouse. As vague as it is toothless, the accord on curbing greenhouse gas emissions that emerged from the Bella Centre this weekend imposes no real obligations, sets no binding emissions targets and requires no specific actions by anyone.

So should we be disappointed? Well, actually, no. It is not that man-made global warming isn't real or that we don't need to take meaningful action to combat it. It is and we do.

Nonetheless, the dismal outcome of the 15th United Nations Climate Change Conference should make us hopeful. Why? Because its failure may be just the wake-up call the world has needed – the splash of cold water that may finally get us to face the facts about what works and what does not work to cure climate change.

For 17 years now, ever since the Rio "Earth Summit" back in 1992, the effort to combat global warming has been dominated by a single idea – the notion that the only solution is to drastically cut carbon emissions. Anyone incautious enough to suggest that there might be more effective ways of controlling climate change, or that it is simply not politically or economically feasible to try to force a world that gets 80 per cent of its energy from carbon-emitting fossil fuels to suddenly change its ways, was dismissed as a crackpot or, worse, a secret global-warming denier. The fact that the Rio-Kyoto-Copenhagen approach to global warming was clearly getting us nowhere was apparently one of those inconvenient truths that people prefer to ignore.

Well, call me a cock-eyed optimist, but Copenhagen's failure strikes me as being too abject to ignore. For all of President Barack Obama's talk of an "unprecedented breakthrough", all the world leaders really did was try to paper over their differences with a three-page communiqué that basically asks us to cross our fingers and hope for the best. They would have done better to have acknowledged their impotence and gone home empty-handed. Never has the fundamental bankruptcy of the carbon-cutting strategy seemed more obvious.

So I am hopeful that political leaders may finally be ready to face the truth about global warming – namely, that if we are serious about wanting to solve it, we need to adopt a new approach. Promising to cut carbon

emissions may make us feel virtuous, but that is all it does. If we actually want to cool down the planet, we need policies that are technologically smarter, politically more feasible and economically more efficient.

The stark lesson of Copenhagen is that the world is neither willing nor able to go cold turkey when it comes to ending its addiction to fossil fuels. The problem, particularly for China, India, and the rest of the developing world, is that there simply are not any affordable alternatives.

Keep in mind that global energy demand is expected to double by 2050. What this means is that if we want to reduce (if not actually eliminate) our use of fossil fuels without totally crippling the world economy, we are going to have to increase our reliance on green energy technologies by several orders of magnitude.

In a paper for the Copenhagen Consensus Centre in July 2009, Isabel Galiana and Professor Chris Green of McGill University examined the state of non-carbon based energy today – including nuclear, wind, solar and geothermal energy – and came to some disconcerting conclusions. Based on present rates of progress, they found that, taken together, alternative energy sources could, if hugely scaled up, get us less than halfway towards a path of stable carbon emissions by 2050, and only a fraction of the way towards stabilisation by 2100. The technology will simply not be ready in terms of scalability or stability. In many cases, the most basic research and development is still required. We are not even close to getting the needed technological revolution started.

The Copenhagen accord attempts to deal with this reality by offering a vague promise that developed nations will eventually contribute as much as \$100bn a year to help poor countries cope with climate change. If this money were to be spent on helping developing countries adapt to climate change, the pledge might make sense, since it would be likely to make a real and immediate difference in people's quality of life. But that is not where the money is supposed to go. The text of the agreement specifies that most if not all of the funds are to be spent "in the context of meaningful mitigation." In other words, the money would be used to subsidise carbon cuts, a pointless exercise that would do nothing to ameliorate current miseries – and at best might reduce temperatures slightly a century from now.

But what if we put these funds to better use? What if, instead of condemning billions of people around the world to continued poverty by trying to make carbon-emitting fuels more expensive, we devoted ourselves to making green energy cheaper? As solutions go, it is quicker, more efficient and far less painful.

Right now, solar panels cost so much that only well-heeled, well-meaning westerners can afford to install them. But if we could make them or other green energy technologies cheaper than fossil fuels over the next 20 to 40 years – and there is no reason to think that we cannot – we would not have to force (or subsidise) anyone to stop burning carbon-emitting fuels. Everyone, including the Chinese and the Indians, would shift to the cheaper and cleaner alternatives – solving global warming.

So how do we get to this happy place? We need to increase spending on green-energy R&D by a factor of 50. For 0.2 per cent of global gross domestic product, or \$100bn a year, we could bring about the technological breakthroughs it will take to make green energy cheaper and fuel our carbon-free future. For both developed and developing world governments, it would be a lot more politically palatable than carbon cuts.

The millions of concerned people around the world who put their hopes in Copenhagen may have been bitterly disappointed by the paltry outcome. But the summit's failure could be a blessing in disguise. For the last 17 years, we have been putting the cart before the horse, pretending we could cut carbon emissions now and solve the technology problem later. Perhaps now, as they limp home from Copenhagen, our leaders will recognise the deep flaws in their current approach and chart a smarter course.