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Global Warming as Seen From Bangladesh

Momota Begum worries about hunger, not climate change.

By [BJØRN LOMBORG](#)

The following article is part of a series leading up to the December United Nations conference in Copenhagen on how ordinary people in different countries view global warming.

When the monsoon rains come, Momota Begum and her husband and children must take turns sleeping in their tiny concrete house's one bed to escape the waste and human excrement that can wash in from outside. They live in a three-decade old refugee camp in Dhaka, Bangladesh. It is run for Urdu-speaking people who found themselves on the wrong side of the border after Bangladesh won its independence from Pakistan in 1971.

Late last year, campaigning politicians and journalists visited the 20,000 residents of the camp. This visit gave many of the refugees hope that their living conditions would soon be improved.

"They saw our living conditions here," 45-year-old Mrs. Begum told a Copenhagen Consensus Center researcher in June. "It gave us hope every time these people came, but now I understand that even if people know about us, it doesn't matter."

As a cart-puller, Mrs. Begum's husband earns about \$44 each month. The family has no savings. Mrs. Begum believes that education could help her children achieve a better life. But her eldest daughter dropped out of school at age 13. The family could not afford the \$22 annual fee for books and uniforms. "It's better that she stays at home and helps out," Mrs. Begum said.

Bangladesh provides camp residents with water and electricity, but not proper sanitation. Mrs. Begum cooks the daily meal next to an open drain. Diarrhea is common. Mrs. Begum's family cannot afford the \$2.90-\$4.30 cost of going to a private health clinic when someone in the family gets sick.

In the developed world, when we consider how best to help Bangladesh, our minds quickly turn to policies that would reduce the amount of carbon emissions to lessen the risk that global warming will lead to rising sea levels over the next 50 or 100 years.

Mrs. Begum's biggest challenge is not what the sea level may do in five or 10 decades. She has a more modest request: "It would be a heaven's gift if a proper drainage system could be arranged in this area where all the drains are covered and do not overflow."

Getting basic sanitation and safe drinking water to the three billion people around the world who do not have it now would cost nearly \$4 billion a year. By contrast, cuts in global carbon emissions that aim to limit global temperature increases to less than two degrees Celsius over the next century would cost \$40 trillion a year by 2100. These cuts will do nothing to increase the number of people with access to clean drinking water and sanitation. Cutting carbon emissions will likely increase water scarcity, because global warming is expected to increase average rainfall levels around the world.

For Mrs. Begum, the choice is simple. After global warming was explained to her, she 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."

One of Bangladesh's most vulnerable citizens, Mrs. Begum has lost faith in the media and politicians.

"So many people like you have come and interviewed us. I have not seen any improvement in our conditions," she said.

It is time the developed world started listening.

Mr. Lomborg is director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, a think tank, and author of "Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming" (Knopf, 2007).

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