

Bjorn Lomborg: Get Real, Make Green Energy Cheaper

Cutting carbon emissions is not the right solution, we must seriously ramp up our commitment to green-energy development

by Bjorn Lomborg | May 31, 2010

Bjorn Lomborg, 45, is a former director of the Environmental Assessment Institute in Copenhagen. In 2002, Lomborg, in association with the institute, set up the Copenhagen Consensus Center which advocates prioritising global expenditure on controlling the spread of diseases like AIDS and malaria, and malnutrition instead of diverting all resources to tackle global warming. He is best known for his controversial book on the subject of global warming, 'The Skeptical Environmentalist.' Professor Lomborg is a vegetarian and was selected as one of Time magazine's 100 most influential people in 2004.

I would single out the idea that policymakers should pay more heed to economic science — and less to hyperbole and alarmism — when they are formulating solutions to the world's biggest problems.

Focussing on the data instead of indulging our fears would allow us to realise three things. First, there's an awful lot about the planet that is getting better (e.g. air pollution, clean water, nutrition). Second, many of the problems we've been told to worry about (e.g., the use of fertilisers) are not problems at all. Third, some of the "solutions" we've spent many years and billions of dollars pursuing may not actually be making things better.

Take global warming as an example of this last point. For the last 20 years, we have focussed single-mindedly on cutting carbon emissions, and where has it gotten us? Greenhouse-gas levels in the atmosphere are higher than they've ever been. Man-made climate change is real and we do need to do something about it. But the so-called Kyoto approach — in which governments are supposed to either force or bribe their citizens to drastically reduce their use of carbon-emitting fuels — clearly hasn't worked. Why? Because it's based on an abstract conception of how the world ought to be, as opposed to how it really is.

In fact, ours is a world in which most developing countries depend almost exclusively on fossil fuels to power their economies. And in such a world it's both impractical and immoral to insist that the only solution is for everyone to drastically cut carbon emissions. This approach might make sense if we were able to offer developing countries practical, affordable alternatives to coal and oil. But we cannot — and as long as we can't, all we're really doing when we call for massive carbon cuts is asking the world's poor people to continue living lives of misery and deprivation.

You cannot expect people to care about what the environment may be like 100 years from now if they are worrying about whether their children have enough to eat today. With this in mind, we should focus on the many more immediate problems faced by the developing world today — problems such as malnutrition, education, disease and clean drinking water.

Another thing we might do is stop obsessing about far-fetched scenarios. Let's drop the hyperbole and instead focus on the true costs of dealing with the challenge of climate change.

Economic research shows conclusively that rather than trying to make fossil fuels more expensive, we should be trying to make green energy sources cheaper. Right now there simply aren't any affordable alternatives to coal and oil. We talk a lot about solar and wind power, but these green-energy technologies aren't anywhere close to being able to replace our reliance on carbon-emitting fuels. To achieve the kind of breakthroughs it will take to fuel a carbon-free future, we must seriously ramp up our commitment to green-energy research and development. Not only would this be a much less expensive fix than trying to cut carbon emissions out of existence, it would also reduce global warming far more efficiently.

In other words, let's get real. Instead of empty agreements and moral posturing that merely make us feel good, let's adopt reality-based policies that actually do good. And that's an idea that could change the world.

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