

Rio+20: Right sentiment, wrong problems, poor solutions

World leaders gathered in Rio for the Rio+20 Earth Summit are looking at the wrong problems, writes Bjorn Lomborg.



The Rio+20 summit is an opportunity to foster global cooperation, says Paddy Ashdown Photo: AP

By *Bjorn Lomborg*

10:39PM BST 19 Jun 2012



18 Comments (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/environment/9343162/Rio20-Right-sentiment-wrong-problems-poor-solutions.html#disqus_thread)

It is great that world leaders are gathering in Rio de Janeiro for the United Nations' 'Rio+20' Earth Summit. They definitely have the right sentiment, wanting to help the planet. Unfortunately, they will achieve little because they are focusing on poor solutions for the wrong problems.

Ultimately, the summit is a missed opportunity to tackle the most important environmental issues. The UN and countless politicians have chosen to focus on trendy issues like global warming and a green economy instead of prosaic but much more important issues like air and water pollution. Little has been achieved since the first Earth Summit in 1992, and the Rio+20 negotiations illustrate that the status quo is likely to continue.

Much of Rio+20 has focused on making the third world part of the 'green economy', as defined by Europe and the US. But developing countries are right not to be lured into this beguiling notion'. Today's green economy policies only make minuscule carbon reductions at an extremely high cost. They promise jobs, but only with huge subsidies – and this raises costs for the rest of the economy, causing an equal or greater number of job losses elsewhere.

Most of the world's poor people are focused on making a living, let alone a 'green living'. Likewise, for most poor people, there are far more immediate problems to confront. Nine hundred million people are malnourished, one billion lack clean drinking water, 2.6 billion lack sanitation, and 1.6 billion lack electricity. Every year, about 15 million people die from diseases that would be cured easily and cheaply. Crucially, while rich countries are worrying about global warming and enamoured with alluring solutions like the green economy, there are far more important environmental issues at stake for the third world. Each year, 13% of all deaths in the developing world come from old-fashioned air and water pollution. In comparison, even if we unrealistically attribute all deaths from flooding, droughts, heat waves and storms to global warming, it causes about 0.06% of all third world deaths. Air and water pollution kills 210 times as many.

By focusing on a green economy, the first world might help prevent one person from dying. That sounds good until you realize it means that 210 people in poorer countries will die needlessly – because the resources that would have saved them were spent on biofuels, solar panels, windmills and other rich world obsessions.

[World 'sleep walking to catastrophe' Prince Charles warns Rio conference \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/9336974/World-sleep-walking-to-catastrophe-Prince-Charles-warns-Rio-conference.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/9336974/World-sleep-walking-to-catastrophe-Prince-Charles-warns-Rio-conference.html)

[British population getting too fat for planet \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/environment/9338023/British-population-is-getting-too-fat-for-the-planet.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/environment/9338023/British-population-is-getting-too-fat-for-the-planet.html)

[Onshore wind farm subsidies 'axed by 2020' \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/energy/windpower/9336027/Subsidies-for-onshore-wind-farms-to-be-axed-by-2020.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/energy/windpower/9336027/Subsidies-for-onshore-wind-farms-to-be-axed-by-2020.html)

Today's crucial environmental problems of air and water pollution leave six million people dead every year. Twenty years from now, we could have saved 120 million lives, if only Rio+20 had focused on solving the right problems.

There is an increasing rift between the fashionable environmental issues focused on by rich countries and the prosaic needs of the rest of the world. A breakdown at Rio+20 might be a good thing, if it wakes up the rich world to tackling the more important environmental issues first.

Bjorn Lomborg (www.lomborg.com) is head of the Copenhagen Consensus Center and the author of The Skeptical Environmentalist and Cool It

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2012