

# Why governments are wrong about climate change

In this article reproduced with the kind permission of Project Syndicate 2009, **Bjørn Lomborg**, adjunct professor at the Copenhagen Business School, offers a contrarian view on the climate change debate. Prof. Lomborg is the author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist* and *Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming*. He is the organizer of the Copenhagen Consensus.



Professor Bjørn Lomborg



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Eradication of malaria should be a priority

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President Barack Obama's book, *Dreams from My Father* reveals a lot about the way we view the world's problems. Obama is in Kenya and wants to go on a safari. His Kenyan sister Auma chides him for behaving like a neo-colonialist:

"Why should all that land be set aside for tourists when it could be used for farming? These *wazungu* [white people] care more about one dead elephant than they do for a hundred black children." Although he

ends up going on safari, Obama has no answer to her question.

That anecdote has parallels with the current preoccupation with global warming. Many people – including America's new president – believe that global warming is the preeminent issue of our time, and that cutting CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is one of the most virtuous things we can do.

To stretch the metaphor a little, this seems like building ever-larger safari parks instead of creating more farms to feed the hungry.

Make no mistake: global warming is real, and it is caused by our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The problem is that even global, draconian, and hugely costly CO<sub>2</sub> reductions will have virtually no impact on the temperature by mid-century.

Instead of ineffective and costly cuts, we should focus much more on our good climate intentions of dramatic increases in zero-carbon energy, which would fix the climate towards mid-century at low cost. But, more importantly for most of the planet's

citizens, global warming simply exacerbates existing problems – problems that we do not take seriously today.

Consider malaria. Models show global warming will increase the incidence of malaria by about three percent by the end of the century, because mosquitoes are more likely to survive when the world gets hotter.

But malaria is much more strongly related to health infrastructure and general wealth than it is to temperature. Rich people rarely contract malaria or die from it; poor people do.

Tackling nearly 100 percent of today's malaria problem would cost just one-sixtieth of the price of the Kyoto Protocol. Put another way, for each person saved from malaria by cutting CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, direct malaria policies could have saved USD 36,000.

Of course, carbon cuts are not designed only to tackle malaria. But, for every problem that global warming will exacerbate – hurricanes, hunger, flooding – we could achieve tremendously more through cheaper, direct policies today.

2,000 died. Haitians were a hundred times more likely to die in an equivalent storm than Dominicans.

Obama's election has raised hopes for a massive commitment to carbon cuts and vast spending on renewable energy to save the world – especially developing nations. As Obama's Kenyan sister might attest, this could be an expensive indulgence. Some believe Obama should follow the lead of the European Union, which has committed itself to the ambitious goal of cutting carbon emissions by 20 percent below 1990 levels within 12 years by using renewable energy.

This alone will probably cost more than one percent of GDP. Even if the entire world followed suit, the net effect would be to reduce global temperatures by one-20<sup>th</sup> of one degree Fahrenheit by the end of the century. The cost could be a staggering USD 10 trillion.

Germany has subsidized solar panels, as some hope Obama might. Thus, everybody, including the poor, pays taxes so that mostly wealthier beneficiaries can feel greener. But climate models demonstrate that Germany's USD 156 billion expense will delay warming by just one hour at the end of the century. For one-50<sup>th</sup> of that cost, we could provide essential micronutrients for two to three billion people, thereby preventing perhaps a million deaths and making half the world's population mentally and physically much stronger. Again and again, we seem to choose the dubious luxury of another safari park over the prosaic benefits offered by an extra farm.

Most economic models show that the total damage imposed by global warming by the end of the century will be about three percent of GDP. This is not trivial, but nor is it the end of the world. By the end of the century, the United Nations expects the average person to be 1,400 percent richer than today.

An African safari trip once confronted America's new president with a question he could not answer: why the rich world prized elephants over African children.

Today's version of that question is: why will richer nations spend obscene amounts of money on climate change, achieving next to nothing in 100 years, when we could do so much good for mankind today for much less money?

The world will be watching to hear Obama's answer. ♦



The world is waiting to see Obama's response to climate change

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Strong carbon cuts could avert about 0.2 percent of the malaria incidence in a hundred years. The cheerleaders for such action are loud and multitudinous, and mostly come from the rich world, unaffected by malaria.

The other option is simply to prioritize eradication of malaria today. It would be relatively cheap and simple, involving expanded distribution of insecticide-treated bed nets, more preventive treatment for pregnant women, increased use of the maligned pesticide DDT, and support for poor nations that cannot afford the best new therapies.

For example, adequately maintained levees and better evacuation services, not lower carbon emissions, would have minimized the damage inflicted by Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans.

During the 2004 hurricane season, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, both occupying the same island, provided a powerful lesson. In the Dominican Republic, which has invested in hurricane shelters and emergency evacuation networks, the death toll was fewer than 10. In Haiti, which lacks such policies,