

Europe needs real vision on climate

By Bjørn Lomborg

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Barring last-minute upsets, the [climate conference](#) in Cancún will close on Friday having delivered on expectations that it would achieve nothing meaningful.

As negotiators, commentators and campaigners head home, attention will turn to what happens next. Pundits and politicians in Europe will inevitably argue that we should “go it alone” and strengthen the European Union’s 20/20/20 policy, which aims to cut greenhouse gas emissions to 20 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020 and ensure 20 per cent renewable energy. The real lesson is that it is time for Europe to abandon its quixotic carbon-cutting crusade.

It is curious, to say the least, that since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, we have spent 19 years trying again and again with carbon reduction negotiations that have done nothing to reduce temperature rises.

This approach to global warming does not work economically: keeping temperature rises under 2°C would cost \$40,000bn a year by 2100 and avoid less than 2 cents of climate damage for every dollar spent, according to research by climate economist Richard Tol.

Nor has this policy worked politically. The public has a low acceptance of expensive carbon cuts. Outside Europe, few leaders have managed to pass significant emission reduction legislation. Kevin Rudd’s attempt as Australian prime minister contributed to his ousting, while other leaders who have pushed green legislation in recent years – even Barack Obama – have hardly fared any better in the popularity stakes. This means that the only significant climate change legislation anywhere in the world is the EU’s 20/20/20 policy.

Prof Tol examined this policy for the Copenhagen Consensus Center and found that it will cost \$250bn. And what will it achieve? Standard climate models show that, by the end of this century, the EU’s approach will reduce temperature rises by approximately 0.05°C – almost too small to measure.

After repeated failures, we will again hear calls for Europe to toughen its carbon reduction target to 30 per cent below 1990 levels, from those who believe that this would demonstrate “leadership” on climate change. This is incredibly misguided. Prof Tol calculates this would cost roughly \$550bn a year, twice as much as the existing plans. The effect, over the next 90 years, would be to reduce temperatures by an additional one-hundredth of a degree.

There is a better option. We will never succeed in making fossil fuels so expensive that no one wants them. The reason it costs so much to reduce emissions is that the green alternatives are not close to being ready to replace oil and other fossil fuels.

Instead, we should make green energy so cheap that everyone wants it. This requires much bigger investments in green energy. Research by McGill University's Professor Chris Green for the Copenhagen Consensus Center shows that an investment on the order of 0.2 per cent of global gross domestic product – amounting to about \$100bn – would help us create the needed breakthroughs. If we had affordable green energy sources, everyone – including China and India – would buy them, and long-term emissions would drop dramatically.

We should spend a further \$50bn on adaptation. Just a few years ago, adapting to climate change was seen as tantamount to admitting defeat. But it is common sense to take simple steps such as creating green spaces and reducing asphalt in cities to make them cooler, or working to safeguard low-lying lands from flooding.

We hear a lot today about how developing countries are the most exposed to the perils of global warming. It is true that, in time, poorer nations will be hit hardest by higher temperatures. But they also have many more pressing problems. If your kids are hungry, you don't worry too much about temperature rises in 100 years. Thus, if we wanted to spend the EU's 20/20/20 budget wisely, we could allocate the last \$100bn to them. According to UN data we could essentially provide food, water, sanitation, healthcare and education to everyone who still lacks it for about \$100bn.

The EU is spending \$250bn to achieve minuscule reductions in temperature rises. We must change paths before the next climate conference in South Africa in 2011.

*The writer is head of the Copenhagen Consensus Center and adjunct professor at Copenhagen Business School. He is the author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist* and *Cool It**