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## Bjorn Lomborg on the Rio Green Summit: Poverty Pollutes

### A message from Bjørn Lomborg to organizers of the Rio+20 environmental summit: poverty pollutes.

by [Bjorn Lomborg \(/contributors/bjorn-lomborg.html\)](/contributors/bjorn-lomborg.html) | May 28, 2012 1:00 AM EDT

The upcoming United Nations green summit in Rio de Janeiro is in trouble—and with good reason. The planners of the mammoth event have been unable to agree on just what to say in the outcome document, ironically called “The Future We Want.” This week, dignitaries are meeting in New York City for a final attempt to find common ground.

It won't be easy. Over the past four decades, the U.N.'s concern for “green” issues has moved ever closer to the fashionable concerns of rich Westerners and away from the legitimate concerns of the overwhelming majority of the earth's people.

It wasn't always like this. Forty years ago, the first U.N. environmental conference in Stockholm helped to crystallize the global need for sound environmental policy. Over the next 20 years, however, the emphasis became much more driven by Western concerns. Whereas Stockholm had been a conference on the “Human Environment,” the theme of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit was “Environment and Development”—and development took the back seat.

This summer, 20 years further on, dignitaries from around the world are again heading for Rio, and development has almost entirely slid off the negotiating table. While paying lip service to goals such as poverty eradication, Rio+20 (as the gathering is known in U.N. parlance) will focus on “sustainability.” It's a word that used to be about human needs. The classic U.N. definition, published in the world body's 1987 Brundtland report, put it this way: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

But today the term is code for global warming and similar concerns. In a remarkably honest Reuters interview, Brazil's chief Rio+20 negotiator, Ambassador André Corrêa do Lago, says the summit's “sustainable” branding is deliberate: “Sustainable development is an easier sell globally than climate change, even though sustainable development is a way of tackling global warming and other environmental issues.”



Life Without Lights: A wood stove provides illumination for a man's house-trailer home in New Mexico. (Peter DiCampo / VII Mentor Program)

Global warming is real. Burning fossil fuels produces CO<sub>2</sub>, a greenhouse gas that warms the planet. The consequences of this can be either positive or negative, depending on where you live. It will result in more deaths from excessive heat, but fewer caused by cold. In Canada, Denmark, and Russia, moderate global warming is likely to be an overall improvement, whereas in the tropics even a small temperature rise will probably be negative. Toward the end of this century, the overall impact will be mostly negative.

The trouble is that almost every aspect of modern civilization is powered by fossil fuels. How can we expect the world to give them up without a cheaper alternative? Consider the 1992 Rio summit's biggest outcome: the Framework Convention on Climate Change, which led to the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. The Rio approach to global warming was typical U.N.: let's negotiate a treaty with aspirational language and see if it might solve an intractable problem.

Unsurprisingly, it hasn't.

The Kyoto Protocol basically asked developed nations to cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, either by reducing energy consumption or by using more expensive, greener energy. Economic models show that a full implementation of the Kyoto agreement would have cost the world an estimated \$180 billion a year in lost GDP growth. Yet the benefit would be an immeasurable temperature reduction of just 0.004 degrees Celsius (0.008 degrees Fahrenheit) by the end of the century. Predictably, most countries either rejected the treaty or made changes that were barely noticeable. The abatement in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions has been minuscule. Even the European Union, the treaty's most enthusiastic supporter, has simply shifted much of its industrial production (and the resulting greenhouse-gas generation) to countries not covered by the Kyoto Protocol, like China.

Nevertheless, the U.N. approach has remained the same ever since, through the catastrophic 2009 Copenhagen meeting and last year's meaningless follow-up gathering in Durban, South Africa. The same aspirational language will be rehashed in Rio.

We hear plenty of hype about climate-change "solutions" like solar panels and biofuels, but these green

technologies are not yet the answer. As long as wind turbines and solar panels remain more expensive than fossil fuels while working only intermittently, they will never contribute much to our energy supply. Germany, the world's largest per capita consumer of solar energy, produces just 0.3 percent of its energy this way. And to achieve this No. 1 status, the country has paid \$130 billion for \$12 billion worth of energy. The net reduction in CO2 emissions will slow the pace of global warming just 23 hours by the end of the century.

Similarly, biofuel production is now consuming 40 percent of the U.S. corn harvest, even though it supplies only 4 percent of the transport fuel used in America. Around the world, the turn to biofuel crops is resulting in higher food prices—and hence increased hunger. And as farmers expand their agricultural land, they cut down more forests, which perversely could lead to an overall increase in CO2 emissions.



Children have to study by flashlight in an off-the-grid town in northern Ghana. Nearly 1.4 billion people—nearly a quarter of humanity—live without access to electricity. (Peter DiCampo / VII Mentor Program)

To solve global warming, we need to concentrate on innovating cheaper green technology through a massive increase in R&D. We will get nowhere until we can make green energy less expensive than fossil fuels.

But perhaps more important, what really matters to most people is not global warming and other problems on the Rio+20 agenda. There is a deep and disturbing disconnect between the mighty who walk the plush carpets in the U.N. arena and what the majority of the world's inhabitants need.

The truth is that while we mull green initiatives, approximately 900 million people remain malnourished, 1 billion lack clean drinking water, 2.6 billion lack adequate sanitation, and 1.6 billion are living without electricity. Every year roughly 15 million deaths—a quarter of the world's total—are caused by diseases that are easily and cheaply curable.

What are the three most important environmental issues in developing nations? Most people in rich countries get the answer wrong, even with repeated tries. Global warming is not among them—not even if

we look at all the deaths caused by flooding, droughts, heat waves, and storms. Since the early part of the 20th century, death rates from these causes have dropped 97 percent or more. Today, about 0.06 percent of all deaths in the developing world are the result of such extreme weather.

Instead, one of the biggest environmental killers in the developing world is a problem unfamiliar to most people in rich countries: indoor air pollution. We take for granted our access to heat, light, and convenience at the flick of a switch. But 3 billion people in developing nations have no choice but to use fuels like cardboard or dung to cook their food and try to warm their homes. The annual death toll from breathing the smoke of these fires is at least 1.4 million—probably closer to 2 million—and most victims are women and children. When you fuel your cooking fires with crop residues and wood, your indoor air quality can be 10 times worse than the air outside, even in the most polluted Third World cities. Not that you're safe when you leave the house: outdoor air pollution is estimated to kill another 1 million people a year in the developing nations. Almost 7 percent of all deaths in the developing world come from air pollution. The figure is more than 100 times the toll from floods, droughts, heat waves, and storms.

The second problem is the lack of clean drinking water and sanitation. About 7 percent of all deaths in the developing world are associated with a lack of clean drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene. That's almost 3 million deaths each year.

The third big environmental problem—and yes, it is an environmental one—is poverty. To the more than 1 billion people subsisting on less than \$1.25 a day, worrying about environmental issues is a distant luxury. If your family is freezing, you will cut down the last tree for fuel; if they are starving, you will strip the land bare to feed them. And if you have no certainty about the future, you will provide for it in the only way possible: by having more children to care for you in your old age, regardless of how much they will add to humanity's demands on the planet.

Poverty means entire disadvantaged communities have less to eat, get less education, and are more exposed to infectious disease. Allowing them to get richer enables them to satisfy their families' immediate needs like food, clean water, and education. And then they can afford to start caring about the environment. Recent history suggests that when living standards go up, people and societies reduce their pollution, stop cutting down forests, and stop dying from dirty air and bad water.

In short, helping people to emerge from poverty is one of the best things we can do for the environment. And yet the emphasis in Rio will be on creating a new “green economy.” The summit's organizers asked one of its biggest boosters, the New Economic Foundation, to explain what this buzzword actually means. The British think tank's answer? “Don't start from a growth perspective.” Instead, we're told people need “reduced overall consumption,” and Japan is commended for experiencing virtually no growth since the 1990s. Poor countries should pursue a “revitalisation of rural economies, taking advantage of the synergies arising from consumption patterns at low-income levels”—in other words, they should be content with the poverty they have. In a report on “green jobs” published last year by the International Labor Organization, the U.N. itself declared the world's current economic model a failure: “The model of growth and development pursued in the last decades has not delivered the inclusive growth and sustainable development aspired to by people around the world.”

Let's pause for a minute and consider the latest figures on global absolute poverty, which came out this year. Contrary to the U.N.'s dire assessment, humanity has never seen a clearer reduction in poverty worldwide. The proportion of people living in absolute poverty has dropped massively, from 52 percent in 1981 to 22 percent today.

With the current economic model, the U.N.'s own climate panel is forecasting an extreme reduction of poverty worldwide over the coming century: per capita income in what we now call the developing world

is projected to soar to more than 23 times the 2000 level by the year 2100. So how can the U.N. argue that such economic growth needs to be overturned and replaced with a “complete transformation of technology on which human economic activity is based”?

Look at China. It wasn't by going green that China's leaders pulled 600 million out of poverty in the past three decades. They did it by enormous—polluting, but overwhelmingly successful—GDP growth. They did it through large-scale international trade.

Despite what you might imagine (Beijing also plays the West's green charade), China gets just 1/20th of 1 percent of its energy from wind, and one half of 1/1,000th of 1 percent of its energy from solar panels. China's leaders know—as do those in the West, despite their rhetoric—that wealth doesn't come from subsidizing inefficient technologies, and that jobs aren't created by taxing the rest of the economy to pay for uneconomic green jobs. They know that what matters is participating in an international economy. Economic studies show that a successful Doha Round of the World Trade Organization talks would do between 100 and 1,000 times more good for Third World countries than any realistic climate deal could ever achieve.

We need to ask for our Earth Summit back. The environment is important—so important that we had better look after it intelligently. That means no more Kyoto Protocols, It means no more forest-destroying, hunger-inducing biofuels. It means much more focus on green R&D to tackle global warming. But mostly it means smart investments that focus on the problems that matter most right now. It means responding to poverty in ways that accomplish more than just making donors feel good about themselves.

Sure, sometimes solar panels can be the best way to provide access to electricity in far-flung communities. But for most of the 1.6 billion people who live without electricity, we should opt for the tested, simple, and cheap solution: hook them up to generators or power plants, which, just like ours, run mostly on fossil fuels. When the sun goes down, it's literally lights out for those people. What makes us think they should have technologies that are more expensive, less reliable, and much feebler than the ones we rely on?

The same goes when we tackle indoor air pollution. Solar cookers may sometimes be a good idea. But the technologies that have served us well in the past, such as kerosene and natural-gas stoves, are much more likely to be cheap, flexible, and useful.

Genuine sustainability and a truly green economy can be achieved only if we ensure real growth and development, the kind that will lift many more people out of poverty—the kind that will ultimately enable them to make responsible environmental decisions for themselves. This means getting the Doha Round of trade talks back on track.

This June in Rio there will be much talk about organic farming, electric cars, and solar panels. There will be no shortage of goodwill. But goodwill alone is not enough to change the fact that the solutions being talked about are the wrong solutions, and the problems being discussed are not the most important ones.

To get to the future we want, we need to get back to basics. We need to do what works.

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