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Climate Change and Melting Glaciers

Nepal's poor have more pressing problems.

By **BJØRN LOMBORG**

Global warming has captured the attention of politicians around the world. The following article is part of a series leading up to the December United Nations conference in Copenhagen on how ordinary people in different countries view the issue:

Nine years ago, Maya Bishwokarma moved with her family to Kathmandu from Trisuli, a remote village in the hilly Nepal countryside. Their search for a better life has proved elusive. She and her husband and two sons live in a small, two-room house with her brother-in-law's family, near the bank of a small stream that has been converted into an open sewer.

"The life of the poor is more miserable here [than in the countryside]," Mrs. Bishwokarma told a Copenhagen Consensus researcher in June. "Our kids are suffering." The family cannot afford to send their children to a good school.

One of the visible signs of this family's hardship is the lack of basic amenities. Their hut has electricity, but rolling blackouts mean there is no power for as much as 16 hours a day. Even during the wet season, Mrs. Bishwokarma must line up with other local residents to collect water handed out every six days by government officials. Due to a long drought, the price of vegetables and food has soared.

The lack of water in the shadow of the Himalayas may seem like a strong argument for drastic, short-term reductions in carbon emissions. Indeed, the plight of people like the Bishwokarmas has been used by Al Gore and other campaigners to argue for just such cuts. Climate activists argue that there is a link between melting glaciers in the Himalayas and water shortages elsewhere.

On the surface, this makes sense. But when we dig deeper, we find that the Himalaya glaciers are difficult even for scientists to understand. Most suggestions of rapid melting are based on observations of a small handful of India's 10,000 or so Himalayan glaciers. A comprehensive report in November by senior glaciologist Vijay Kumar Raina, released by the Indian government, looked more broadly and found that many of these glaciers are stable or have even advanced, and that the rate of retreat for many others has slowed recently.

Jeffrey S. Kargel, a glaciologist at the University of Arizona, declared in the Nov. 13 issue of *Science* that these "extremely provocative" findings were "consistent with what I have learned independently," while in the same issue of the magazine Kenneth Hewitt, a glaciologist at Wilfrid Laurier University, agreed that "there is no evidence" to support the suggestion that the glaciers are disappearing quickly.

When glaciers thicken and expand, the summer runoff into rivers decreases. In other words, when climate change does increase glacial melting, the flow of water to poor people like the Bishwokarmas will increase for several decades.

This does not mean that we should cheer on climate change, which will affect the planet in a myriad of complex and challenging ways. It does cast new light on one argument for drastic, short-term carbon cuts. It is important, after all, that we base our response to global warming on the most solid scientific expectations.

What did Mrs. Bishwokarma have to say about such questions? Several times, she asked the Copenhagen Consensus researcher to explain what "climate change" was. When it was explained, she agreed that it was a concern.

But she added that the government of Nepal and others should spend money "first on our everyday problems, then on global warming." To her, with the perspective of living in a slum and unable to send her children to good schools, that prescription makes a lot of sense.

Mr. Lomborg is director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, a think tank, and author of "Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming" (Knopf, 2007).

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