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Does Helping the Planet Hurt the Poor? No, if the West Makes Sacrifices

By PETER SINGER

Environmental protection often comes at the expense of the world's poorest people, who struggle to meet their subsistence needs. Children carry firewood in the eastern Indian state of Bihar.

All of us who are middle class or above in the U.S. and other industrialized nations spend money on many things we do not need. We could instead donate that money to organizations that will use it to make a huge difference in the lives of the world's poorest people—people who struggle to survive each day on less than we spend on a bottle of water. For decades, that is what I've been advocating we should do.

But this concern for the poor appears to be in tension with the need to protect our environment. Is there any point in saving the lives of people who will continue to have more children than they can feed? Don't rising populations in developing countries increase the pressure on forests and other ecosystems? Then there is climate change. How would the world cope if everyone were to become affluent and match our per capita rate of greenhouse gas emissions?

I take these questions very seriously. My first popular book, "Animal Liberation," published in 1975, argued that we should extend our ethical concerns beyond the boundary of our species. In Australia, my country of birth, I was a founding member of the Australian Greens. So balancing poverty reduction and environmental values is important to me. The problem is how to do it.

Part of the answer—the easy part—is that poverty reduction and environmental values often point in the same direction. It is simplistic to assume that helping more children to survive to reproductive age is bound to increase population in poor countries. Poor parents often have large families so that at least some of their children will survive to take care of them in old age. As parents grow more confident that their children will live to adulthood, they have fewer children. And if reducing poverty makes it possible for families to send their children (especially their daughters) to school, all the evidence indicates that their children will have smaller families.

But we shouldn't pretend that there is bound to be this kind of harmony between economic development and environmental protection. Some development projects provide employment opportunities for the poor but at a high cost to wilderness. From Indonesia to Brazil, vast areas of tropical rainforest have been cleared to grow palm oil and soybeans or to graze cattle, thus destroying entire ecosystems and releasing huge quantities of carbon.

What should we do? Sometimes we should choose to protect the environment and the nonhuman animals that depend on it, even if that denies economic opportunities to some people living in extreme poverty. Areas rich in unique biodiversity are part of the world's heritage and ought to be protected. We should, of course, try to find alternative environmentally sustainable opportunities for those living in or near these areas. But there is no single currency by which we can measure the benefit of saving human lives against the cost of destroying forests that provide the last remaining refuges for free-living chimpanzees, orangutans or Sumatran tigers.

Cost-benefit analysis certainly can't handle this task. Even when economists ignore environmental concerns, their usual method of assigning a value to human lives leads to the ethically embarrassing conclusion that the poor count for less because they earn less and cannot pay as much to reduce life-threatening risks.

Economists also tend to trip up on the issue of whether to discount the future. Suppose we believe that in 200 years, people would be prepared to pay \$1 million (in current dollars) to have a virgin forest in their region. Today, however, we can profit by cutting down the forest. If we discount the future value of the

forest by 5% per annum, how large a present-day profit would be necessary to cover the loss of a million dollars in 2211? Just \$60. Such a discount rate cannot be justified on the basis of the real rate of return on capital. It implies a pure time discount—that is, it implies that the future matters much less than the present.

Giving equal weight to the interests of future generations provides us with strong reasons to be concerned about environmental preservation, as well as about the more immediate concern of reducing global poverty. We should help today's global poor, but not at the expense of tomorrow's global poor. To preserve the options available to future generations, we should aim at development that does no further damage to wilderness or to endangered species.

It is clear, though, that the planet cannot sustain six billion people at the level of the most affluent billion in the world today, especially in terms of greenhouse gas emissions. The failure of the major industrialized nations to reduce their emissions to a level that will not cause serious adverse effects to others is moral wrongdoing on a scale that exceeds the wrongdoing of the great imperial powers during the era of colonialism.

According to the World Health Organization, the rise in temperature that occurred between the 1970s and 2004 is causing an additional 140,000 deaths every year (roughly equivalent to causing, every week, as many deaths as occurred in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001). The major killers are climate-sensitive diseases such as malaria, dengue and diarrhea, which is more common when there is a lack of safe water. Malnutrition resulting from crops that fail because of high temperatures or low rainfall is also responsible for many deaths. Fertile, densely settled delta regions in Egypt, Bangladesh, India and Vietnam are at risk from rising sea levels.

In 2007 the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that a temperature rise in the range of 2 to 2.4 degrees Celsius by 2080 would put stress on water resources used by 1.2 billion people. Rising sea levels would expose, each year, an additional 16 million people to coastal flooding. A temperature rise limited to two degrees by 2080 now seems about the best we can hope for, and recently there have been alarming indications that sea level rises could be much greater than the IPCC anticipated.

Perhaps a technological miracle is just around the corner, one that will enable everyone in the world to consume energy at something like the levels at which we consume it, without bringing about disaster for everyone. It isn't ethically defensible, however, to do nothing while hoping for a miracle, given that it will be others, not us, who suffer the gravest consequences if that miracle never arrives.

Some argue that there is little point in the older industrialized nations cutting back on their emissions when China has already overtaken the U.S. as the world's leading emitter of greenhouse gases; India's emissions are also growing rapidly. The problem is that someone has to take the lead. Otherwise, everyone will hold back to see who goes first, and no one will act.

All the ethical arguments point to the industrialized Western nations taking the lead. On the familiar rule that "if you broke it, you fix it," there is no doubt that these nations bear historical responsibility for most of the greenhouse gases now in the atmosphere. Several Chinese think tanks recently produced a report titled "Carbon Equity." They calculated that from 1850 to 2004, the average American put 21 times as much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere as the average Chinese, and 53 times as much as the average Indian.

Granted, until the 1980s, no one really knew the effect of putting carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, but we definitely knew about it in 1992 when the "Earth Summit" was held in Rio de Janeiro. The U.S. and other major nations signed a declaration promising to keep greenhouse gas emissions below the level that would cause "dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system." That's a promise that has manifestly not been kept.

Even if newly emerging major emitters like China, India and Brazil were prepared to forget about the past and share the burden of major reductions in greenhouse gases, the only fair long-term basis for such a distribution would be equal per capita shares. On that basis, the U.S. is still emitting four or five times as much as China and at least 12 times as much as India.

There is also a strong moral case for saying that rich nations should cut back on their "luxury emissions"

before poor nations have to cut back on “subsistence emissions.” India still has more than 450 million people living in extreme poverty, and China over 200 million. No one with any concern for human welfare could ask the world’s poor to refrain from increasing their greenhouse gas emissions in order to put more food on the table for their families, when we think little of flying down to the tropics for a winter vacation, emitting more in a week than the typical family in a developing country does in a year. Needs should always take precedence over luxuries.

All of us living comfortably in industrialized nations should use more energy from sources other than fossil fuels, use less air-conditioning and less heat, fly and drive less, and eat less meat. And we ought to start doing these things now, for our own sake, for the sake of the global poor and for the sake of future generations everywhere.

A Reply to Bjørn Lomborg

Contrary to what Mr. Lomborg suggests, my essay does not focus exclusively or primarily on green issues, nor do I accept en bloc the green agenda that he criticizes. I am not opposed to the genetic modification of plants, for example, as long as there is proper oversight.

I can’t see how my opposition to discounting the future would leave us eating only porridge, as Mr. Lomborg says. We can take our fair share of the abundance that the world is capable of producing, but we should not indulge in luxuries that require the emission of high levels of greenhouse gases, thus imperiling the lives of hundreds of millions of less fortunate people.

Mr. Lomborg doesn’t reject the idea that we have an ethical obligation to future generations. Nor does he defend cost-benefit analyses that value a human life in proportion to the person’s income. On both issues, he just says that we are too selfish to do what is right. Mr. Lomborg is a technological optimist but an ethical pessimist. I’m all for sustainable technology and economic growth, but I also think we should do what we can to encourage people to take a more ethical approach to global issues.

I wish that Mr. Lomborg were right that \$100 billion a year could provide the world’s poor with clean drinking water, sanitation, food, health and education, but that figure is wildly optimistic. By using this very low figure, and by ignoring the very real risk that climate change will turn out to be a disaster on an unprecedented scale, Mr. Lomborg can misleadingly claim that trying to slow climate change is a bad investment.

Let me end by agreeing with Mr. Lomborg on the need for more investment in research and development for green energy. Such investment could be funded by a carbon tax or, under a cap-and-trade scheme, by the sale of quotas to emit carbon. Either of these methods of putting a price on carbon would in itself create further economic incentives for the development of green energy.

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Does Helping the Planet Hurt the Poor? Yes, if We Listen to Green Extremists

By BJØRN LOMBORG

An area on the border of the Amazon rainforest, scorched by fire to produce charcoal and to clear land for agriculture.

Peter Singer poses an interesting and important question: Can we afford to both reduce poverty and clean up the environment? From an empirical standpoint, the answer is definitely yes. The developed world is sufficiently rich that doing both should be well within our means.

The key, of course, is being smart about how we tackle these big problems. Right now, the only legally binding climate policy, the European Union's 20-20 policy, will cost its members \$250 billion in lost economic growth every year over the next century (according to research by the noted climate economist Richard Tol). Yet the net effect will be an almost immeasurable reduction in global temperatures of just 0.1 degrees Fahrenheit by 2100. If spent smartly, the same resources really could fix both global warming and poverty.

In a curious way, Mr. Singer's essay is an example of one of the stumbling blocks to making smarter policy decisions. He starts out saying we want to do a variety of good things, but almost reflexively he ends up focusing on green issues—and doing so in a very predictable way: The developed world has sinned and needs to atone.

Mr. Singer correctly points out that concerns over the environment and poverty are often linked. But he thinks about this only in terms of how poverty is bad for the environment, since poorer, less educated people tend to have more children, which puts more pressure on such things as forests and biodiversity.

But his argument can—and should—be taken further. As we get richer and such immediate concerns as water, food and health become less of an issue, we become more open to environmental concerns. Among other things, we become more willing to pay extra for technology that pollutes less and to accept more costly regulations to limit pollution.

We've already seen the results of this "greening" of society in the developed world, where for a number of decades air and water pollution has been dropping steadily. In London, which keeps the best statistics, air pollution maxed out in 1890 and has been declining ever since—to the point where the air is now cleaner than it has been at any time since 1585. In similar fashion, in some of the better-off developing countries, the focus has shifted from creating to cleaning up pollution. Today the air in both Mexico City and Santiago, Chile, is getting healthier.

Mr. Singer also evades the awkward point that an excessively green approach can actually make the environment more imperiled. Consider the fate of the world's forests. As we get richer and more environmentally conscious, our growing passion for organic farming and antipathy to genetically modified crops inevitably leads us to accept decreased agricultural yields. An obvious consequence is that we end up converting more wilderness to agricultural use.

We've seen similar unintended consequences from the use of inefficient first-generation biofuels such as ethanol. As a result of pressure from environmentalists and lobbying by agricultural interests, use of these fuels was made mandatory by many governments in the industrialized world. Diverting farm products into our gas tanks has driven up food prices, resulting in more starvation and wasted resources and causing still more forests to be razed.

Mr. Singer criticizes the use of cost-benefit analysis because it doesn't value human lives at the same rate in developed and developing countries. As uncomfortable as it may be, the reality is that we don't

actually think of all people as equal. If we did, we would be building all of our new hospitals in developing countries. Mr. Singer may regard this fact as shameful, but ignoring the ethical judgment of nearly everyone makes his analysis less helpful.

Similarly, Mr. Singer criticizes the way that discounting is used by economists to make future costs comparable to values in the present. He argues that we should give “equal weight to the interests of future generations.” Once again, this may sound admirable. But think about the consequences of heeding Mr. Singer’s advice. By choosing a discount rate close to zero, we effectively say that the desires of infinite numbers of future generations are vastly more important than our own, meaning that we should save the great bulk of our resources for the future and consume just enough to survive. Essentially, our generation should eat porridge, while we leave virtually all benefits to the future.

This was what the economist Nicholas Stern concluded in the controversial 2006 review of climate change that he conducted for the British government. Mr. Stern said, in effect, that we should be saving 97.5% of all our wealth for future generations. The silliness of this view becomes apparent when we realize that, by this logic, our children and grandchildren also would be expected to continue the cycle of bowing to future generations, leaving almost everything to their progeny and pushing forward an ever larger mountain of resources that are never to be consumed.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

In 2008, Mr. Lomborg’s Copenhagen Consensus Center convened some of the world’s top economists to evaluate how \$75 billion could be best used to solve global problems.

At the top:

Micronutrient supplements for children (vitamin A and zinc)

For an annual cost of \$60.4 million, the economists projected a yield of more than \$1 billion in benefits.

Tuberculosis management

In 22 countries with a high incidence of TB, diagnosis and treatment would yield \$1.7 trillion in benefits for a cost of \$18.3 billion.

At the bottom:

Global-warming mitigation

Spending \$800 billion on carbon taxes was found to generate only \$685 billion worth of benefit.

We don’t behave this way. Partly because we are selfish and partly because we expect that future generations are likely to be much better off than we are. Compared with the future, we are the poor generation, and it is hardly moral to have the poor generation pay the most. Rather, it makes sense to leave generalized assets, such as knowledge and technology, to future generations. This gives them a much greater capacity to tackle problems that come their way. Our actual financial savings for the future tend to be about 15% of income. We could debate whether the number should be 10% or 20%, but it is far-fetched to suggest that it should be 97.5%. We all recognize that we should care for the future, but at the same time we should care for ourselves.

Mr. Singer falls into the trap of saying that global warming is so terrible that dealing with it should take priority over all other concerns. This is simply wrong. Global warming is a problem that we must confront, but according to economic modeling by Carlo Carraro of the University of Venice, its damage is likely to cost something on the order of 2% to 5% of GDP by the end of the century.

At the same time, it is helpful to recall that our fossil-fuel economy has created amazing opportunities for almost everyone in the world, lifting hundreds

of millions of people out of poverty. The United Nations climate panel estimates that economic growth will enable an increase per capita GDP in developing countries by some 2,400% over the course of the century.

Mr. Singer claims that problems related to climate change (such as an increased incidence of malaria) cause 140,000 deaths a year. Let’s put aside for the moment the fact that rising temperatures are likely do more good than harm on this score, preventing so many cold-related fatalities that the net effect of global warming is likely to be a total of about 200,000 fewer people dying each year.

Even if we accept Mr. Singer's concerns, is fighting global warming through drastic carbon cuts really the best way to help people with malaria? By implementing the Kyoto protocol (at a cost of \$180 billion a year), we could reduce the number of annual malaria deaths by 1,400. But we could prevent 850,000 malaria deaths a year at a cost of just \$3 billion simply by providing adequate supplies of mosquito nets and medicine. For every potential malaria victim saved through climate policy, we could save 36,000 people through smarter, cheaper remedies for malaria.

From Mr. Singer's initial question of whether we can afford to both reduce poverty and clean up the environment, he ends up focusing on global warming and arguing that we simply need to "use less air-conditioning and less heat, fly and drive less, and eat less meat." This is a poor prescription, not only for those of us in developed nations but for developing countries and for future generations as well. It is an incredibly expensive way to achieve very little — and it won't happen.

Fortunately, there is a more sensible way forward that could use the same \$250 billion that the European Union is expecting to waste annually on ineffective global warming policies. First, we should spend about \$100 billion a year on research and development to make green energy cheaper and more widely available. Mr. Singer argues that it is not ethically defensible just to hope for a "technological miracle" that will allow us to end our reliance on fossil fuels. He is right. We must invest much more in green energy research and development, and it is the most politically realistic and economically efficient way to combat global warming.

This would leave \$50 billion a year to develop adaptations for dealing with the impact of global warming and \$100 billion a year for the world's poor, a sum that, according to the U.N., would go a long way toward providing them with clean drinking water, sanitation, food, health and education.

We are perfectly capable today of tackling the problems of both poverty and environmental pollution. But to do so, we must think clearly and rationally, and we must carefully weigh the costs and benefits of the approaches available to us.

Mr. Lomborg is the author of "The Skeptical Environmentalist" and "Cool It." He directs the Copenhagen Consensus Center and is an adjunct professor at Copenhagen Business School.

Notes

¹<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703779704576074333552233782.html>

²<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703779704576074360837994874.html>