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Who Should Be Helped First?

The list of urgent challenges facing humanity is depressingly long. AIDS, hunger, armed conflict, and global warming compete for attention alongside government failure, malaria, and the latest natural disaster. While our compassion is great, our resources are limited. So who should be helped first?

By Bjørn Lomborg

To some, making such priorities seems obscene. But the United Nations and national governments spend billions of dollars each year trying to help those in need without explicitly considering whether they are achieving the most that they can.

The western media focuses on a tsunami in Asia; donations flow freely. An earthquake that devastates Pakistan garners fewer headlines, so the developed world gives a lot less.

There is a better way. We could prioritize our spending to achieve the greatest benefit for our money.

This month, I will ask UN ambassadors how they would spend $50 billion to reduce suffering. They will repeat the same exercise that some of the world's best economists tackled in a 2004 project called the "Copenhagen Consensus": weighing up solutions to the great challenges facing the world, and deciding what should be done first.

But the question shouldn't be left to politicians or Nobel laureates alone. We must all engage in the debate. One hopes that this task has been made slightly simpler by the publication of a book in which the Copenhagen Consensus economists boil down their insights.

Here's one fact to consider: the entire death toll from the Southeast Asian tsunami is matched each month by the number of worldwide casualties of HIV/AIDS. A comprehensive prevention program providing free or cheap condoms and information about safe sex to the regions worst affected by HIV/AIDS would cost $27 billion and save more than 28 million lives. This, say the economists who took part in the Copenhagen Consensus, makes it the single best investment that the world could possibly make. The social benefits would outweigh the costs by 40 to one.

Other options that the economists favored spending some of their $50 billion include providing micro-nutrients to the world's hungry, establishing free trade, and battling malaria with mosquito nets and medication. At the other end of the scale, responses to climate change like the Kyoto Protocol would cost more than they would achieve, so the economists crossed them off the list of things to do right now.

Regardless of whether we agree with the economists, everybody must admit that we cannot do everything at once. Discussing our priorities is crucial. Often, politicians avoid prioritization. Why? The glib answer is because it is hard. There are many interested parties. No group wants their solution to come last, and no government wants its country's national challenges to be overlooked.

The UN conference won't be easy. But it shows that there is a will to put prioritization squarely at the center of attention. It will produce a "to do" list that will demonstrate how to achieve the most that we can for humanity, which could lead, in turn, to more transparent decision-making.

The principles of economics provide a sound basis on which to make rational choices. Now, the discussion needs to shift from the academic sphere to political life. It's time for all of us to consider and compare our own priority lists.

We must endeavor to shorten the list of challenges facing humanity. But that requires all of us to engage in a debate about what we need to do first.