UN Climate Change Conference, Copenhagen 2009: Whatever Works?

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For about 2 weeks, thousands of official delegates attended the United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark. In addition, thousands of protesters and law enforcement officers were active in the streets, often at odds with each other. The confrontation between these two groups was sad to view, as both sides are on the same side of history. Their primary goal was to get the governments of the world to create a plan for a sustainable atmosphere. Yet, minimal agreement was reached. Watching from afar via television, the conference appeared to resemble organized chaos more than a high-level, enlightened, humanitarian consideration of our global climate change crisis. It was clear that many delegates were only concerned with the here and now, not with the future of the Earth's biosphere and humankind.

According to Lester Brown, the human reasons for concern about climate change varied widely for the 193 national delegations who gathered in Copenhagen. Delegates from low-lying island countries were

principally concerned about rising sea levels. For countries in Southern Europe, climate change means less rainfall and more drought. For countries of East Asia and the Caribbean, more powerful storms and storm surges are of growing concern. The climate change conference was about all these things and more. In a more fundamental sense, it was about food and water security for a population still growing at 80,000,000 people per year. It should have been, about human overpopulation, the single most important driving force responsible for all of our environmental concerns.

The archaic and outdated format of this meeting often seemed like an exercise in bargaining, trading, compromises, and deal making. More world leaders attended this meeting than any meeting since the formation of the United Nations. Anyone who has ever organized or attended a large meeting knows that putting thousands of delegates in a conference room, with each delegate trying to promote his or her own agenda, is not the best way to organize and manage such a meeting. A much better approach would have been to have a significant portion of the work completed before arrival, with common ground already established between groups with common concerns. This usually requires organizational skills and coordination of efforts on behalf of these countries so that maximal impact can be achieved. When the delegations arrived at the meeting, they should already have had the relevant accurate data, knowledge, and policy positions on the major and

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minor issues. They needed to have the groundwork already done for a productive outcome. Yet, it seems clear that appropriate preparation was lacking.

Having low or minimal standards for success guarantees some degree of success but not necessarily an acceptable level of achievement. Defining the minimal standards that each country is willing to accept (regardless of whether it would be legally binding) would be an important first step. Meanwhile, global pollution is on the rise as our population grows and our per capita resource consumption increases. It should not have been acceptable to settle for far less than a significant advance.

It seems ironic that countries can successfully plan years in advance for Olympic Games but cannot adequately plan for a conference to avoid a potentially catastrophic event such as global climate change. At the UN meeting, many countries and delegates seemed less concerned with confronting a menacing man-made phenomenon than with sub-issues such as who pays for what, or details of what an allowable amount of pollution should be. We clearly need to enunciate what is really at stake and create a system of national and international emissions reduction strategies along with appropriate surveillance which will be imposed on every country. It is essential that the data be trustworthy and that the data must be disseminated to all countries. This will allow progress to be evaluated so that penalties as well as rewards can be provided. Discussion should not have focused on “whether or not to do it” but on “how to best do it.”

Meanwhile, in view of these international failures, many citizens throughout the world need to make local efforts to implement conservation-minded lifestyles in their own day-to-day routines. Everyone might be advised to think of their carbon footprint and to try to minimize it. This will require active thought and effort because we are all creatures of habit. A change of habit always requires some inconvenience and pain, and most people are reluctant to think either globally or locally.

Just imagine the carbon dioxide production resulting from the thousands of people who traveled to Copenhagen to attend this meeting! Many of the delegates knew that they traveled with crossed signals. They attended the meeting in hopes of reducing the greenhouse gases that cause global warming, but they reached their destination by

traveling in ways that increase these gases. They were clearly not setting good examples for younger world citizens.

The goal to implement conservation-minded lifestyles can have serious implications for world economic growth and the feeling of personal well-being. Mass consumption of goods and services may increase the flow of money for international trade and the personal wealth of certain industrialists. However, how does it affect the average world citizen? How does it affect the one billion people who live under poverty conditions? We would suggest that it does nothing for the poorest of us and, in fact, enhances the disparity between the rich and the poor.

In order to make a difference, we must cut consumption and reduce the human population so that greenhouse emissions will decrease. This is the number 1 solvable issue, but this will require more than paper agreements in international conferences. Measures must be implemented by individuals in every household, community, and country in order for the process to work in a harmonious manner. This is no small task and may require a global public education program. We *need* to have free birth control methods and abortion services available to every poor person on Earth. Such a program can be expected to be expensive (about 40 billion dollars per year), but the estimated annual costs are just a tiny fraction of the annual costs of the wars currently being staged in Iraq and Afghanistan. One year of war could pay for 25 years of universal family planning availability for the entire world population. This approach would give us a chance for sustainability. What rational person would not be in agreement of such a shift in economic priorities?

The best ways to decrease global greenhouse emissions include:

- Shifting to the use of green energy sources, such as wind, tidal, and solar
- Using much more efficient transportation vehicles such as bikes and public buses and trains
- Conserving by reducing consumption and waste, reusing when possible, and, when all else fails, recycling
- Halting of the use of unnecessary products, many of which we would even be *happier* without
- Limiting human population growth by providing universal free birth control and abortion services

It has been reported that China has recently passed the USA in net pollution generation. On a per capita basis, US citizens would have to use just one quarter of the resources they presently use to match the consumption rate of the average Chinese citizen. Who in the West is willing to reduce consumption to this degree? Considering what's at stake, everyone should be. We are, are you?

We must also stop making, deploying, and using weapons of mass destruction. To minimize resource consumption, we must use all available resources for the benefit of humankind. Conflicts that give rise to wars cannot be tolerated because wars are the most destructive and wasteful causes of resource consumption. Moreover, we should invest in research and innovation to bring better energy technologies into use and stop trying to obtain an economic edge over other countries. We live in a human-made world of irrational, unsustainable, economic growth with trade based upon a consume, consume, consume and debt, debt, debt philosophy. This is a philosophy that has no lasting value as resources dwindle.

Individuals who disagree with this analysis will likely suggest that we do not see the whole picture or that we do not understand frail economics in times of recession/depression. They will argue that their country cannot make sacrifices, particularly if others do not make equivalent sacrifices. Economic growth, they will say, is the key to prosperity, power, and control. We would argue that their country cannot afford *not* to make these sacrifices. Economic growth is simply a man-made invention, designed primarily to promote the unequal distribution of monetary wealth. We wish to emphasize that man-made systems cannot escape the fundamental laws of thermodynamics which dictate energy transformations throughout the universe. These laws clearly imply that too many humans, consuming too many resources, creating too much pollution, can never be sustainable.

In the end, “whatever works” is the minimal agreement that 193 countries were able to reach. However, most people know this is insufficient, and this fact led to dissatisfaction and frustration. Signif-

icant decreases in the human population must occur if we are ever to live sustainably. Remarkably, we have the means to achieve this goal while preventing human suffering. Another baby born means suffering and premature death for that individual or another. Further, truly meaningful climate change goals must be attained, and in a hurry. Maybe in the not-too-distant future, a truly meaningful international meeting will emerge that will address the real issues. We cannot let individual countries have the veto; an international forum of wise and informed representatives may have to be the supreme governing body with nations relinquishing control. Perhaps then, problems can be solved before they arise.

How do we move coastal cities, each with millions or tens of millions of people, and still keep the respective infrastructure safe? We prefer to take the Taoist view and solve the smaller problems before they become crises. The truly great leaders are not the ones who are best known; they are the ones who see and prevent problems before they arise. A preventative approach could be less painful with far fewer premature deaths and far less human suffering, and who knows, we might even be able to save thousands of species from extinction!

We need to understand economic growth in developing and developed countries and how this might raise standards of living for all world citizens. We also need to build infrastructure for specific developing countries so they have a chance to emerge from their poverty. We must recognize that in a rapidly warming biosphere, it will be impossible to feed even 3–4 billion people, half of what we currently have. Agricultural research, education and food safety, and security must be an international priority.

Economic growth has not fixed the current crises of poverty, suffering, and human exploitation. A hot, overpopulated, hungry planet with a universally acceptable standard of living will be enormously more difficult to manage than our current situation. If the nations' delegations could only have recognized this, more progress would have resulted in Copenhagen.