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Global Crises, Global Solutions

Bjørn Lomborg (Ed.)

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 647 pages.

Reviewed by ROBERT COSTANZA

Global Crises: Unfortunately Unrecognized and Unsolved

Global Crises, Global Solutions is an unfortunate book. It begins with a good question: how should \$50 billion (or some other large amount) of new foreign aid money be spent over the next four years to get the most "bang for the buck"? However, the method chosen to answer this question is fatally flawed, rendering the results useless, if not dangerous.

The flaws are apparent in the first 8 pages of the introductory chapter, which is the only section of this 647-page book written by its editor, Bjørn Lomborg. The fair and important question of how to prioritize our global challenges and opportunities certainly needs more serious attention. But Lomborg's method is problematic. First, he generated a list of 32 "general challenges facing humanity" by scouring UN publications (see Table 1). Even this initial step was not inclusive, because sustainability is not mentioned. The sustainability challenge is a core global problem, long recognized by the United Nations (see, e.g., World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) so it is hard to imagine how a scan of UN publications missed it.

Another major flaw arises in the next step. Rather than circulating this list to a broad

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range of stakeholders for comment and review (as Lomborg acknowledges he could have done), he instead concluded that even though this effort might produce more "buy-in," it would take too long. It is ludicrous that he could not afford to devote another month or year to a process whose recommendations for spending billions on global problems he hoped would be taken seriously. Even a cursory glance at the initial list of problems would have identified the major omission mentioned above. Contrast this with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2001) process or the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment's four-year, 1,300-participant process of scientific consensus building.¹

Lomborg narrowed the original list of 32 challenges down to the 10 "found to hold the most promising opportunities" (page 4).

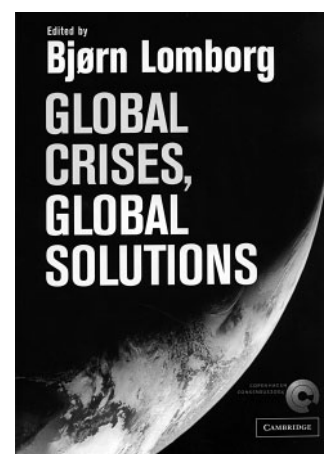


Table 1: Global Challenges in *Global Crises, Global Solutions*

The 32 Original Challenges Facing Humanity	The Final 10 Challenges Found to Hold the Most Promising Opportunities
<p>Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Air pollution Chemical pollution and hazardous waste Climate change Deforestation Depletion of the ozone layer Depletion of water resources Lack of energy Land degradation Loss of biodiversity Vulnerability to natural disasters <p>Economy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital divide Financial instability Lack of intellectual property rights Money laundering Subsidies and trade barriers Transport and infrastructure 	<p>Governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arms proliferation Conflicts Corruption Lack of education Terrorism <p>Health and population</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drugs HIV/AIDS Human settlements Lack of people of working age Malaria Living conditions of children Living conditions of women Non-communicable diseases Undernutrition/hunger Unsafe water and lack of sanitation Vaccine-preventable diseases

Found by whom? Eight like-minded economists who met for one week—hardly worthy of the name “Copenhagen consensus,” considering the problems’ magnitude.² The bias inherent in both of these initial winnowing steps is huge but never acknowledged. For example, while the initial list of 32 includes 10 environmental challenges, ranging from air pollution to deforestation, from lack of energy and water to climate change, the final list includes only one environmental entry: climate change.

Contrast this with Jared Diamond’s (2004) list of the 12 most serious environmental problems facing past and future societies—problems that more often than not have led to the well-documented collapse of these histori-

cal societies:

- Loss of habitat and ecosystem services;
- Overfishing;
- Loss of biodiversity;
- Soil erosion and degradation;
- Energy limits;
- Freshwater limits;
- Photosynthetic capacity limits;
- Toxic chemicals;
- Alien species introductions;
- Climate change;
- Population growth; and
- Human consumption levels.

While climate change is certainly a serious problem, and has contributed to several histori-

cal collapses—as Diamond and several others (Tainter, 1988; Yoffee & Cowgill, 1988; Ponting, 1991) have pointed out—the interplay of multiple factors is almost always more critical than a single one. Societies on the edge become brittle and lose resilience, making them more susceptible to the impacts of climate change as well as to other potential perturbations, such as political corruption, war, terrorism, or the inability to adapt to new circumstances.

Lomborg commissioned a background paper on each of the 10 challenges from “renowned economics specialists within each field” (page 5). These 10 papers, along with two “alternative perspectives” on each challenge, form the bulk of the book. Unfortunately, while presenting a slightly broader perspective than that of the original eight experts, these papers still draw from far too narrow a set. Despite this, most of the papers in the collection are well worth reading for what they are: statements of a particular position, based on a particular worldview, on a particular complex issue. Missing—for the purposes of this book’s stated aims—are truly alternative positions. Perhaps most important, however, is the lack of any appreciation of the interconnectedness of the global challenges—a systems perspective. The book assumes that these challenges are independently solvable and therefore able to be ranked in a simple linear fashion.

The final chapter of *Global Crises, Global Solutions* presents the experts’ “consensus” ranking of the alternatives. This, again, is a misuse of the term: each expert ranked the alternatives independently, and Lomborg presents the mean rankings as the consensus. Fortunately, the book includes each expert’s individual rankings and reasoning, so that the reader can reconstruct the (still limited) range of opinions and the rationales behind the individual rankings.

What can we conclude about the original question? Unfortunately, very little. We have only the opinions of eight economists, whose thinking on these topics was already well-known before the exercise and changed very little after one week in Copenhagen. We are left with the mere illusion of scientific consensus, an illusion which the editor obviously intended.

But there is a deeper issue. This work demonstrates how worldview or vision can shape the results of purportedly objective analysis. Lomborg and the contributing authors share a worldview that has been called “technological optimism” (Costanza, 2000). Technological optimists assume that technical progress will solve all current and future social problems. Humans and their dominion over nature will continue to expand without limits. This worldview does not see population growth and overconsumption, among other sustainability issues, as problems.

As the work of Diamond (2004), Meadows et al. (2004), and literally thousands of other authors have shown, the problem of sustainability is today’s core global problem. Will our completely interconnected global society fall into the same traps that led to Easter Island’s collapse? I hope not, but we cannot assume these problems will be addressed, as Lomborg and associates do, by simply believing in the power of technology.

Unfortunately, even the title of Lomborg’s book is a sad sham: the authors do not believe that there are any truly global crises, only challenges that a few tens of billions of dollars can solve. They have done the world a grave disservice by holding on to their unquestioned values and assumptions about the feasibility of unlimited economic growth. As demonstrated by the fate of the Easter Islanders, the Maya, the Greenland Norse, and several other historical societies, clinging to maladaptive values in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary could lead to collapse (Diamond, 2004). If we are to create a sustainable and desirable global human society in the 21st century, we must not repeat the same mistakes. This real global crisis requires global solutions, but instead Lomborg’s book only perpetrates past myths.

Notes

1. See www.maweb.org for more information on the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment.
2. It is interesting to note that while Lomborg feels that a small group of like-minded economists are the



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appropriate “experts” to consult on the best way to solve global problems, he has no trouble dismissing the broad and overwhelming scientific consensus reached by experts on the biophysical aspects of environmental issues (Lomborg, 2001).

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Global Population Policy: From Population Control to Reproductive Rights

Paige Whaley Eager
Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004. 234 pages.

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reader with absolutes. There has never been, of course, a “global population policy,” nor can humankind’s complex and diverse response to population and reproduction be easily separated into two camps, population control and reproductive rights.

For Eager, the evolution of population policy has been a tectonic battle between evil (“population controllers”) and good (the “Global Women’s Health and Rights Movement” or GWHRM). Population controllers are white men, mostly American, who are hell-bent on reducing the rate of population growth for economic, political, and national security reasons. Until the Reagan Administration, these powerful men made population control the centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy. They encouraged “governmental use of coercive methods” to compel women to use “unsafe contraceptives” (page 6).

Eager outlines the population controllers’ other transgressions, the most egregious of

