

Copenhagen Talks Not Just About Energy

by John Seager

As world leaders convene the Copenhagen climate talks, discussion has focused on the need for wealthy countries to reduce emissions. Far less attention has been paid to the inevitable reality that emissions in the poorest parts of the world need to increase. And there has been scant recognition of the role played by rapid population growth in rising emissions worldwide.

President Obama is taking a bold first step in Copenhagen by putting forward an ambitious emissions target for the United States. Yet global population growth threatens to undercut - even cancel - all progress. Global population may grow by 18% or more from 2005 to 2020, according to UN projections.

Reducing carbon emissions is actually three separate but related challenges. First, we must reduce global emissions. Second, we must slow population growth by supporting programs such as voluntary family planning. Third, we must recognize that about half the world now suffers from "carbon starvation" and needs to increase emissions.

Historically, as population has increased, emissions have also risen. Most emissions reductions must occur in wealthier countries since that's where they are highest. At the same time, in order to give billions of poor people a reasonable quality of life, emissions in some parts of the world must increase significantly. Rapid population growth makes this balancing act even more difficult.

Given available technology, the often-tiny carbon footprints of billions of people are both a cause and an effect of impoverishment. The one billion people who struggle to survive on less than \$1/day use very little in the way of fossil fuels. And the additional 1.6 billion living on less than \$2/day hardly use more. In order to have decent lives, they must increase their emission levels substantially, despite advances in green technology.

Much of sub-Saharan Africa is mired in the most desperate, grinding poverty imaginable. Governments there are already unable to meet the most basic needs of their citizens. And it is these people - who contribute least to climate change - who will suffer most from the problems that climate change brings. Women especially will face new challenges to their health, livelihoods, and even their lives.

Africa's per-capita emissions must increase. But, if Africa's population grows by the 39% that is projected by 2020, it will be nearly impossible to create a healthy quality of life for people in that part of the world.

Population growth will undermine all efforts to achieve lower carbon emissions unless investments in clean energy are matched by equally comprehensive investments in universal access to contraception along with other health and development programs.

As we develop hybrid cars and the like, what about the other half of the world? Will they be left to sweat and starve while we glide forward into a century of renewable energy? Their carbon footprint needs to grow. That can only work if we are willing to meet the population growth challenge.

This is one of those times - and one of those issues - where we need to keep our eye on multiple goals. Reducing emissions is an energy issue. But it is also in equal measure a human rights challenge, one that must include unprecedented investments in a full spectrum of reproductive health services for women and couples. Worldwide, 200 million women have an unmet need for family planning. And demand for contraception is projected to increase by 40% in just 15 years.

If we fail to act on this broader agenda, initiatives for reducing greenhouse gases will be swept away by a tidal wave of population growth. The White House has already made great strides in reversing the pernicious policies of the Bush Administration which turned a blind eye to the needs of billions. But additional bold action is needed.

No doubt President Obama is keenly aware of the multiple dimensions of the climate challenge. Yes, it's about energy. But, more than that, it is about meeting the basic human needs of soon-to-be seven billion people. Universal access to family planning must be a centerpiece of the climate change agenda in Copenhagen and beyond.

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