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FOCUS ON SAVING LIVES

Al Gore's misplaced priorities

By BJORN LOMBORG

PRAGUE — The organizers of next Saturday's Live Earth concerts hope that the entire world will hear a crystal clear message: Climate change is the most critical threat facing the planet. Planned by former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, Live Earth will be the biggest, most mass-marketed show of celebrity activism in history.

But making global warming the world's top priority means that we shuffle other major challenges down our "to do" list. Some climate change activists actually acknowledge this: Australian author Tim Flannery recently told an interviewer that climate change is "the only issue we should worry about for the next decade."

Tell that to the 4 million people starving to death, to the 3 million victims of HIV / AIDS, or to the billions of people who lack access to clean drinking water.

Human-caused climate change deserves attention — and it has gotten it, thanks to Gore, Flannery, and others. Even before a single note has been played in the "awareness-raising" concerts, much of the developed world believes that global warming is the planet's biggest problem.

Yet, the world faces many other vast challenges. Whether we like it or not, we have limited money and a limited attention span for global causes. We should focus first on achieving the most good for the most people.

The Copenhagen Consensus project brought together top-class thinkers, including four Nobel Laureate economists, to examine what we could achieve with a \$ 50 billion investment designed to "do good" for the planet.

They examined the best research available and concluded that projects requiring a relatively small investment — getting micro-nutrients to those suffering from malnutrition,

providing more resources for HIV / AIDS prevention, making a proper effort to get drinking water to those who lack it — would do far more good than the billions of dollars we could spend reducing carbon emissions to combat climate change.

Carbon reduction activists argue that focusing exclusively on climate change will bring many benefits. They point out, for example, that malaria deaths will climb along with temperatures, because potentially killer mosquitoes thrive in warmer areas. And they would be right. But it's not as simple as the bumper sticker slogan "Fight climate change and ward off malaria."

If America and Australia are somehow inspired by the Live Earth concerts to sign the Kyoto Protocol, temperatures would rise by slightly less. The number of people at risk of malaria would be reduced by about 0.2 percent by 2085. Yet the cost of the Kyoto Protocol would be a staggering \$ 180 billion a year. In other words, climate change campaigners believe we should spend \$ 180 billion to save just 1,000 lives a year.

For much less money, we could save 850,000 lives each and every year. We know that dissemination of mosquito nets and malaria prevention programs could cut malaria incidence in half by 2015 for about \$ 3 billion annually — less than 2 percent of the cost of Kyoto. The choice is stark.

Some will argue that the real problem is that the Kyoto Protocol isn't strong enough. But as I point out in my forthcoming book "Cool It," even if we could stop global warming right now — which is impossible — we could reduce malaria infections by only 3.2 percent by 2085. Should we not worry more about the 100 percent infected now, whom we can help much better, more cheaply, and with much greater effect?

When we look at the evidence, we discover again and again that the best solutions to the world's biggest challenges aren't the ones we hear about the most. We could save many more lives during extreme weather events, for example, by insisting on hurricane-resistant building standards than we would by committing to Live Earth's target of a 90 percent reduction in carbon emissions by 2050. This would be easier, much less costly, and ultimately do far more good. Indeed, the Copenhagen Consensus experts discovered that for every dollar invested in Kyoto-style battling climate change, we

could do up to 120 times more good with in numerous other areas.

It's honorable that the Live Earth organizers are so concerned about the far-off future, but you have to wonder why there is so little concern about the much-worse present.

I don't want to stop anyone from caring about climate change, only to encourage a sense of perspective. There is a massive amount of good that we can do through practical, affordable approaches like HIV / AIDS education, malaria prevention, and the provision of micro-nutrients or clean water.

This is the message I would like to ring out: We should focus on the best ideas first. This Saturday, unfortunately, that is not what we'll hear.

Bjorn Lomborg is the organizer of Copenhagen Consensus, adjunct professor at the Copenhagen Business School, and author of "Cool It" and "The Skeptical Environmentalist." Copyright 2007 Project Syndicate (www.project-syndicate.org)

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