
Book review

Best Things First

by Bjorn Lomborg

Copenhagen Consensus Center

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Best Things First: The 12 most efficient solutions for the world's poorest and our global SDG promises by Bjorn Lomborg focuses on identifying and prioritizing the 12 most effective and cost-efficient strategies for addressing the myriads of global economic challenges among the most impoverished. Lomborg argues that by utilizing a comprehensive benefit-cost analysis to analyze various issues – such as poverty, health, education and agricultural R&D investment – world leaders can allocate resources more efficiently and tackle the most pressing problems with the highest potential for positive impact. This book consists of accessible and comprehensive summaries of peer-reviewed research articles appearing in the *Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis* (2023).

Lomborg introduces this volume with a historical comparison and critique of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) vs the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). This critique centers on the efficacy of the more limited and less-bureaucratically involved MDGs versus the larger-scoped, multi-national development of the SDGs. (See [Vandemoortele, 2018](#), for a similar critical approach.) While Lomborg makes a strong case in Chapters 1 and 2 for the prioritization approach when comparing the historical effects of the MDGs and the current projection struggles of the SDGs, it is helpful to remember that there are extant issues within the range of methodologies and approaches when it comes to SDG outcomes assessment ([Lafortune et al., 2020](#)). To deal with the shortcomings of a complicated evaluative process, Lomborg introduces and explains the evaluative metric, the benefit-cost ratio (BCR), that will be used to present the most effective solutions for the most pressing global challenges (methodology summarized in Chapter 3). Section 2 (Chapters 4 through 15) then present the summarized versions of unique journal articles on each topic and with comparative assessments using the BCR as the central metric for inclusion in the “top 12” as well as ranking the included economic and development policies by their benefit-cost value. These 12 global economic policies will save, according to the authors’ various calculations, “4.2 million lives each year and generate \$1.1 trillion in additional benefits each and every year.” Life-saving policies include targeted and coordinated interventions that would near eliminate tuberculosis and malaria along with increases childhood immunization prevalence and efficacy. On the other spectrum, policies include the compounding effect of agricultural R&D, e-procurement and educational investment.

Lomborg and colleagues are to be commended for an attempt to summarize complex methodological, statistical and econometric analyses for the general audience of policymakers, philanthropists, nonprofit sector leaders, social entrepreneurs, educators and the global citizen. If the goal is to focus attention on the accessibility, attainability and



focused engagement and energy needed to push forward for a better tomorrow, Lomborg has written a gem of a book to do just that. There is an infectious and optimistic energy that flows through the narrative, allowing for hope to spring forth while keeping our sense of scale and investment clear and approachable. Another important feature of *Best Things First* is Lomborg's data-driven methodology. He supports his claims with a wealth of statistics and case studies, illustrating how specific interventions can dramatically improve lives with a relatively modest investment. This pragmatic approach challenges readers to reconsider traditional methods of philanthropy and policymaking, urging them to focus on solutions that deliver maximum value.

While the relatively simple and straightforward articulation of how to “solve the world's problems” is a strength, it also elicits some additional questions. Two of special interest to this reviewer are (1) the summation of both disease and mortality figures across the entire world population obscures important distributional differences by nation that might need to be more closely examined and (2) the “intersectionality” of these global development goals and how that might contribute to less-than-predicted outcomes (or the multiplicative positive effect of combining certain interventions and investments). For example, when discussing tuberculosis and malaria, often figures are summarized for global totals. But even in the case of malaria, where the African continent is identified separately for analysis, there is still the issue of variance within the continent. It is estimated that 25% of children under 5 years of age died of malaria in Niger in 2021 as compared to roughly 0% for 14 other African countries (UNICEF, 2024). This lack of insight into the complexities introduced by such regional variation proffers questions and application and sustainability of these global policies and their benefit-cost analyses. And of course, the age-old issue of decreasing mortality (too quickly) which leads to increased rates of population growth that then result in a vast array of socioeconomic pressures given high stratification regimes and lower-than-average standards of living (see Shelton, 2014).

On the other side of the social ledger, what benefits would accrue across other domains of policy investment and intervention if primary and secondary education improvements were successfully achieved? With so many of the issues of global poverty focused on low human capital regimes along with the greater lack of transparency in governing bodies, increased educational benefits would seem to “touch” so many other dimensions in a strongly positive way. All this to say that it would be an interesting extension to somehow create a correlative measure that links these distinct policy domains and shows how a country might move forward with strongly linked policy investments and both (a) avoid wasted efforts arising from counterintuitive outcomes and (b) maximize the multiplicative effects of certain more aligned and synergistic strategies.

In conclusion, I applaud the verve and insightful delineation of how we as a global society do have, within our grasp, the ability to come together under the common cause of ending the most negative impacts and experiences of global poverty and global stratification and indeed, make deep and lasting positive impacts. I also appreciate the “bridge” that this type of effort is to increasing interest in and the accessibility of cutting-edge econometric, demographic and statistical analyses. Overall, even with the questions of: (1) lack of attention to the wide variances found at the national levels of experiences and (2) lack of insights into the possible unintended negative consequences of some of these policies while in extant development and implantation and/or the unintended positive outcomes due to synergy and compounding of effects, I deem the overall work to be highly successful in attempting to refocus global efforts among a myriad of stakeholders, policy makers, philanthropists, nonprofit sector leaders, social entrepreneurs and educators toward efficacious, lasting and self-sustaining global

improvements to those living in the most vulnerable of living conditions and economic disparities.

Samuel Echevarria-Cruz

*Department of Sociology and Social Work, Austin Community College District –
Riverside Campus, Austin, Texas, USA*

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Further reading

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