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Global row over value of human life

19 August 1995 by [Fred Pearce](#)
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ENVIRONMENTAL economists are refusing to revise a controversial report on the social cost of global warming, which values the lives of people in rich nations up to fifteen times higher than those in poor countries. Critics claim that the report suggests that action to halt global warming may not be cost-effective.

At a meeting of a working group of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in Geneva late last month, delegates from India, China, Brazil, Cuba and others vetoed a summary of the work. The meeting ended in deadlock amid calls for the report to be reworked. But one of the authors, David Pearce of University College, London, told New Scientist this week: "We won't be revising it, and we have no intention of apologising for our work. This is a matter of scientific correctness versus political correctness."

The study forms a chapter in the IPCC's forthcoming Second Assessment Report, its first full report on the science of climate change for five years. The dispute threatens to hold up publication of the report early next year. One solution to the impasse, suggests Pearce, is for the IPCC to remove the chapter from its report entirely.

At issue are some of the techniques developed by environmental economists for analysing the costs and benefits of preventing global warming. As part of this exercise, Pearce and his colleagues have placed values on human lives that range from \$1.5 million for people from the richest countries down to \$100 000 for those in poorer developing nations. The valuations are based on assessments of a community's willingness and ability to pay to avoid risks of death.

The chapter is complete and cannot be changed, says Pearce. But in Geneva, government delegations rejected as immoral and inaccurate the text of a summary of the chapter for policy makers because it implicitly endorsed this approach. They called for a common valuation of human life - preferably at the higher level.

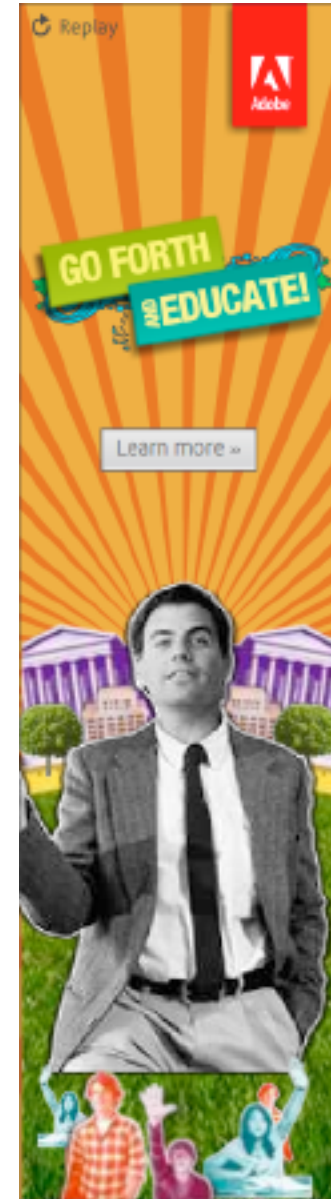
Pearce replies that, while a common valuation of life might be a legitimate approach, it was not what his team was asked to do by the IPCC. In any case, he says, if life values were averaged out, the overall conclusions of the study would not change much. There is, he says, no scientific basis for valuing all lives at the higher level. The result is deadlock. Under IPCC rules, the summary must reflect the scientists' text. But the politicians have refused to accept it, and the scientists will not alter it.

Indian delegates first formally complained about the IPCC's social cost analysis before the Climate Conference in Berlin in April, when environment minister Kamal Nath wrote to ministerial colleagues round the world claiming the calculations were "absurd and discriminatory", and called for them to be "purged from the process".

A key fomenter of dissent among Third-World delegations is Aubrey Mayer of the London-based pressure group, the Global Commons Institute. After the Geneva meeting, he claimed that Pearce's work shows that a doubling of carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere by the middle of the next century would cause damage from climate change valued at between 1.5 and 2 per cent of "gross world product". But reducing emissions of greenhouse gases to prevent such a rise would cost more than 2 per cent of GWP.

"If these estimates had been accepted, it would have meant that the world community had been advised that little need be done to slow the warming process, because it was cheaper not to," he says. Pearce, however, denies that his work is a blueprint for inaction. "There is plenty in our chapter to justify action," he says. "We are specifically debarred from making policy recommendations, but I am on record many times personally calling for action to address global warming."

Meyer says the cost-benefit analysis contains other faults. For instance, estimates of "willingness to pay" to avoid risks of death assumed that incomes in poor countries will remain low. But other IPCC work - on trends in emissions of greenhouse gases, for instance - assumes poor nations will grow richer. "If they get richer, they will be willing to pay more to save lives. The economists' valuation of future lives should reflect that," he says.



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