

Invitation to Copenhagen: Engaging locally in a global consensus

The writer is president of The University of Akron.

BY LUIS M. PROENZA

For most Americans, interest in national issues is limited to presidential elections, singular tragedies or national sports championships. Public concern with international issues is even more narrowly restricted, since foreign politics and non-Olympic athletic events hold little appeal in the United States.

Those who do follow world issues often do so along narrow lines of interest — through the meetings of international bodies and the conclusions they communicate in resolutions, accords and treaties.

Whether in regard to NATO, the World Trade Organization, the United Nations or many other global organizations, we may barely comprehend the issues, although we are always hopeful about the outcomes.

Even the most interested citizens participate primarily as distant observers via the media or the published records of such proceedings.

Yet, with the evolution of the Internet to its current, pervasive state, virtually anyone can engage in a collective consciousness.

So, one might ask, what could potentially interest large audiences and have the capacity to be constructive? Is there a theme or a process that could capture wide attention and, at the same time, elevate our common understanding of world problems and maybe guide us toward appropriate solutions?

Such, I suggest, is the Copenhagen Consensus, just announced in this country on Wednesday and earlier in Europe on March 5.

Initiated in the spring of last year by Bjorn Lamborg, the director of Denmark's Environmental Assessment Institute, and by *The Economist* magazine, the Copenhagen Consensus aims to prioritize solutions to 10 of the most pressing world problems based on a rigorous set of cost-benefit analyses.

Distinguished experts have been commissioned to write a paper on each issue, including three to five potential solutions. In turn, two opponents will write shorter critiques of each of the 10 papers, for a total of 30 submissions. The 10 topics are: armed conflicts, climate change, communicable diseases,

education, financial instability, governance and corruption, malnutrition and hunger, population and migration, sanitation and water, and subsidies and trade barriers.

At meetings in Copenhagen on May 24 through May 28, all of the papers and commentaries will be examined by a nine-member panel that includes some of the world's most distinguished economists, four of whom are Nobel laureates.

At the conclusion of the meetings, the expert panel will have a ranked list of some 30 to 50 potential solutions to present for consideration and possible implementation by national and world bodies.

The political process normally used for discussing world problems and the portrayal of that process by the media have failed to substantially advance progress toward addressing such problems. That process has also failed to acknowledge the role that colleges and universities can — and must — play.

We academics need to seek additional channels not just for communi-

cating potential solutions, but also for engaging larger audiences in discussing and sharing other informed perspectives.

The Copenhagen Consensus offers just such a venue for that kind of dialogue. This exercise and the process behind it have a sporting chance at the mass appeal needed for engendering a larger public benefit and to catalyze other conversations at the national and international level.

That is why I am inviting The University of Akron and my colleagues throughout the academic community to use this rare opportunity to hold a wide-ranging discussion on important world problems and the options for their solution. All of these elements will be unfolding online during the next few weeks, and I encourage everyone to review and track the progress of this unique effort. As each paper is completed, it will be posted through the Internet at www.copenhagenconsensus.com.

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Also, regular commentaries will be published in *The Economist* and, surely, by other newspapers and periodicals.

American interest in international issues currently and understandably is focused on the military events unfolding in Iraq and on the political ramifications in Washington and across the globe. Later this summer, the nation's eyes will be diverted to Athens, Greece, and the opening of the 2004 Summer Olympics.

Somewhere apart from the politics and human tragedy in the Middle East and the sporting aspirations and competition in Athens lies Copenhagen and its unique global assembly devoted to finding feasible, constructive solutions to the world's most pressing problems. Leaders across America have a responsibility to convince a large portion of the nation's population to sit up and pay attention to what comes from the Copenhagen Consensus.
