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U.N. Data and Statistics: Manipulated for a Higher Purpose?

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One of the most important, if unheralded, tasks performed by the United Nations is the gathering, standardizing, and publishing of statistics on a broad variety of issues and subjects. This data is used by academics, experts, and policymakers from around the globe to ascertain and assess the extent and seriousness of a plethora of issues including war, poverty, development, health, climate, education, employment, trade, regulation, financial transfers, demographic statistics, and many more. The absence of such data would make any number of international tasks more difficult and assessing the success of various actions virtually impossible.

Having the U.N. help provide this data is enormously useful. That is why a series of troublesome incidents over the past few years wherein U.N. data was illicitly or consciously manipulated to further certain policy priorities should raise great concern among U.S. policymakers.

Data Manipulation: Rare or Simply Unnoticed? Over the past few years, data promoted by the U.N. to justify various initiatives or proposals to expand current operations have been shown to be inaccurate or deliberately exaggerated. Consider the following examples:

Global Warming. Last fall, leaked e-mails revealed that key scientists working for the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—which provides the authoritative “consensus” on scientific evidence and research regarding global warming and is used to justify an international treaty to constrain greenhouse gas emis-

sions—had sought to manipulate, conceal, and destroy scientific data that undermined their case for global warming.¹

Earlier this month, the IPCC’s “prediction that the Himalayan glaciers had a high probability of melting by 2035” was revealed to be without scientific merit, and the “Nobel Prize-winning U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change” is under fire for failing to heed warnings from IPCC scientists that the prediction was absurd.²

Death Estimates in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). A January 20 news story calls into question the U.N.’s use of an estimate of deaths in the DRC.³ The U.N. has used a report by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) as the basis for its claims that a staggering 5.4 million people have died in the DRC as a result of the 1998 war and subsequent instability. This claim made the DRC conflict the most deadly war since World War II.

A new study by the Human Security Report Project at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia calculates that the deaths are less than half of the IRC’s estimate of 5.4 million. According to a BBC story on the issue, the U.N. may have been willing to accept the Congo death toll estimate without ver-

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ification in order to “justify ramping up the UN presence in the country.”

AIDS Epidemic. Since its establishment in the mid-1990s, the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) has been the lead U.N. advocate for action to address AIDS and the major international voice for increased spending to combat the disease. This dual role led independent experts to question the objectivity of the program’s estimates on the extent of the AIDS epidemic and accuse it of exaggerating claims to increase resources dedicated to combating and treating AIDS.

In 2007, the U.N. was forced to acknowledge that it had “long overestimated both the size and the course of the [AIDS] epidemic, which they now believe has been slowing for nearly a decade.”⁴

The 0.7 Percent Aid Target. The U.N., in an attempt to boost resources for its Millennium Development Goals (MDG), continues to argue that developed nations must provide 0.7 percent of their gross domestic product in development assistance if the MDGs are to be realized.⁵

However, the 0.7 percent aid target has no economic grounding. As noted by the Center for Global Development, “A look at its history shows that it was calculated using methods with little relevance to today’s understanding of the development process.... We find that if we apply the same assumptions that went into the original formulation to

conditions present today, that the updated target would be 0.01% of rich country income—well below current aid levels for all major donors.”⁶

It is important to note that pointing out these data problems does not imply that crises are not real or serious. For example, although there were likely 2 million—rather than over 5 million—deaths as a result of the DRC conflict, it is still a terrible situation; AIDS is a serious problem in need of attention and resources; lack of development is evident and resources can, in some cases, help spur development or alleviate suffering; and global environmental issues should be discussed and addressed as appropriate.

But the objectivity and reliability of U.N. data is critical. Governments use U.N. data to inform a host of policy decisions, including aid allocation and humanitarian relief, decisions to deploy peacekeepers to U.N. missions, tracking development progress under the MDGs, and verifying treaty compliance on matters ranging from the Kyoto Protocol to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. If the data is inaccurate, policy decisions will be compromised.

Moreover, if data is manipulated to exaggerate a crisis, even with the noble purpose of focusing more attention on a very real problem, it does a disservice to other problems. Other crises might be overshadowed by such exaggeration and receive less attention and resources. Worse, if the broader public believes that claims of victims or the extent of prob-

1. Keith Johnson, “Climate Emails Stoke Debate: Scientists’ Leaked Correspondence Illustrates Bitter Feud over Global Warming,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 23, 2009, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125883405294859215.html?mod=googlewsj> (January 24, 2010).
2. Christoph Seidler, “A Costly Mistake: UN Climate Experts Under Fire for Glacier Melt Error,” *Spiegel Online International*, January 20, 2010, at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,672975,00.html> (January 25, 2010).
3. News coverage of the report is available at BBC, “Review of Congo War Halves Death Toll,” January 20, 2010, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8471147.stm> (January 25, 2010). The actual report is Human Security Report Project at the School for International Studies, Simon Fraser University, “The Shrinking Costs of War,” January 20, 2010, at http://www.humansecurityreport.info/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=205&Itemid=91 (January 25, 2010).
4. Craig Timberg, “U.N. to Cut Estimate of AIDS Epidemic: Population with Virus Overstated by Millions,” *The Washington Post*, November 20, 2007, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/19/AR2007111900978.html> (January 25, 2010).
5. For a discussion see Ambassador Terry Miller and Brett D. Schaefer, “The Global Poverty Act: The Wrong Track for U.S. Aid Policy,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1878, April 1, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/ForeignAid/wm1878.cfm>.
6. Michael A. Clemens and Todd J. Moss, “Ghost of 0.7%: Origins and Relevance of the International Aid Target,” Center for Global Development, September 6, 2005, at <http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/3822> (January 25, 2010).

lems are exaggerated, a truly vital concern may be under-recognized and receive fewer resources than it otherwise might garner.

For instance, what other conflicts in Africa have been shortchanged in U.N. peacekeepers and resources because the DRC was deemed a higher priority based on the exaggerated death toll? Did other health problems like child mortality or diseases like malaria see fewer resources because of the exaggerated data on AIDS? How much wealth was lost in order to comply with the Kyoto Protocol based on incomplete and manipulated data? How much more could be lost under a future treaty to mitigate global warming based on such data? Has the focus on the level of development assistance diverted attention from efforts to determine how that assistance could be used more effectively? What other data or warnings by experts and scientists are being excluded and ignored because they do not suit the underlying U.N. agenda?

Trust but Verify. As misguided as the motivation to exaggerate crises may be, it is easy to see how dedicated NGOs could be tempted to promote causes dear to their hearts. Indeed, the motivation to exaggerate problems is clear. Dire predictions garner attention to preferred causes and, not incidentally, bolster donations.

But the U.N., as an international body charged with handling multiple crises, should be more objective. Unfortunately, whether the effort is driven from the top of the U.N. bureaucracy, by a

few influential member states, or through the efforts of issue advocates and NGOs, the U.N. has proven susceptible to using false or manipulated data to focus more attention and resources on various organizational priorities. The above examples are only the ones that have been exposed. It is an open question whether other U.N. data have been manipulated to further noble aims.

U.S. policymakers need to know the facts if they are to allocate finite resources most effectively. In the future, Congress and the Administration should demand full access to U.N. data, methodology, and sources and require this information to be similarly available for public scrutiny and verification. Moreover, before agreeing to fund or support U.N. initiatives, particularly those like reductions in greenhouse gas emissions that pose significant economic costs to the U.S. economy, Congress should seek independent verification of data and conclusions. Such verification should be performed by competent U.S. government authorities and private researchers unaffiliated with the U.S. government and the U.N.

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