

Headline: The world is better than you think

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It is easy to believe that the world is falling apart while watching the news. Climate change, political division, coups d'état, the global pandemic, Russia's ruthless war on Ukraine, Hamas' unjustifiable killings, and the Middle East careering toward widespread violence.

Before panicking, it may be worth stepping back to get some perspective. Media-driven fear demoralizes us—particularly when young—and engenders terrible political decisions by crippling our ability to do better.

War is endlessly and eternally horrific. It is understandable and even necessary that the media spotlights today's conflicts. But this can make us believe that we're living through unprecedented violence. Russia's war indeed meant that battle deaths in 2022 reached a high for this century, but they are still very low historically. Last year, 3.5 in 100,000 people died as a consequence of war, below even the 1980s and far below the 20th-century average of 30 per 100,000. The world has in fact become much more peaceful.

This is of course little consolation to those living amidst the world's conflicts. But the data speak to the problem with the constant barrage of contextless catastrophe and doom. Analysis of media content across 130 countries from 1970 to 2010 indicates that the emotional tone has dramatically and consistently become more negative. Negativity sells, but it informs badly.

The same pattern characterizes climate change reporting. A pervasive and false apocalyptic narrative draws together every negative event—ignoring, almost entirely, the bigger picture. In recent months, for example, fires have been highlighted without indication that the annual burned global area has been declining for decades, reaching the lowest ever last year. Likewise, deaths from droughts and floods make headlines, but we don't hear that deaths from such climate-related disasters have declined 50-fold over the past century.

The data show what we all fundamentally know: The world has improved dramatically. Life expectancy has more than doubled since 1900. Two centuries ago, almost everyone was illiterate. Now, almost everyone can read. In 1820, nearly 90 percent of people lived in extreme poverty. Now it's less than 10 percent. Indoor air pollution has declined dramatically, and its outdoor equivalent has also done so in rich countries. If we could choose when to be born, having all the facts at hand, few would choose any time before today.

This incontrovertible progress has been driven by ethical and responsible conduct, trust, well-functioning markets, the rule of law, scientific innovation, and political stability. We have to recognize, appreciate, and proclaim the value and comparative rarity of each of these.

The constant barrage of negative stories may lead us to imagine that our forward progress is about to end. However, the evidence at hand does not support this conclusion. The latest United Nations Climate Panel scenarios indicate that the average person will be 4.5 times richer by the end of the century than today. Climate change will merely slow progress, such that the average person will be "only" 4.34 times as rich—by no means the end of the world. Yet, fear pushes many to demand an inefficient diversion of hundreds of trillions of dollars to steer the global economy abruptly toward zero carbon emissions.

We need to foster an environment that challenges fearmongering and promotes optimistic yet critical thinking and constructive discussion with regard to the future. We hope that our new Alliance for Responsible Citizenship which will host its first international conference in London from Oct. 30 to Nov. 1 will be of aid in this regard, bringing people of goodwill and good sense together from around the world, to formulate and communicate a positive vision of the future.

To drive progress for the world's poorest, we should similarly focus on efficient and well-documented policies with enormous benefits. Working with more than a hundred of the world's top economists, one of us has helped identify the best solutions to many of the world's most insidious problems: basic tuberculosis treatment that will save a million people a year, land tenure reform that lets poorer people reap the benefits, education technology that can deliver three-times better learning outcomes, and more.

These policies don't make for catchy headlines, but they can do immense good: for a cost of \$35 billion annually, they would save an astounding 4.2 million lives and make the poorer half of the world \$1.1 trillion richer every year.

If we stop being fear-driven, and instead look to the data and the bigger picture, we can see that the world is better than it was, and is likely to get better still. We have a responsibility to adopt the very best policies to move ahead.

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