

# WHY THE STATISTICS POINT TOWARD PROGRESS

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Hans Rosling, a Swedish physician and thinker, argues that the recession is just a tiny setback

Photograph by  
Stephen Voss

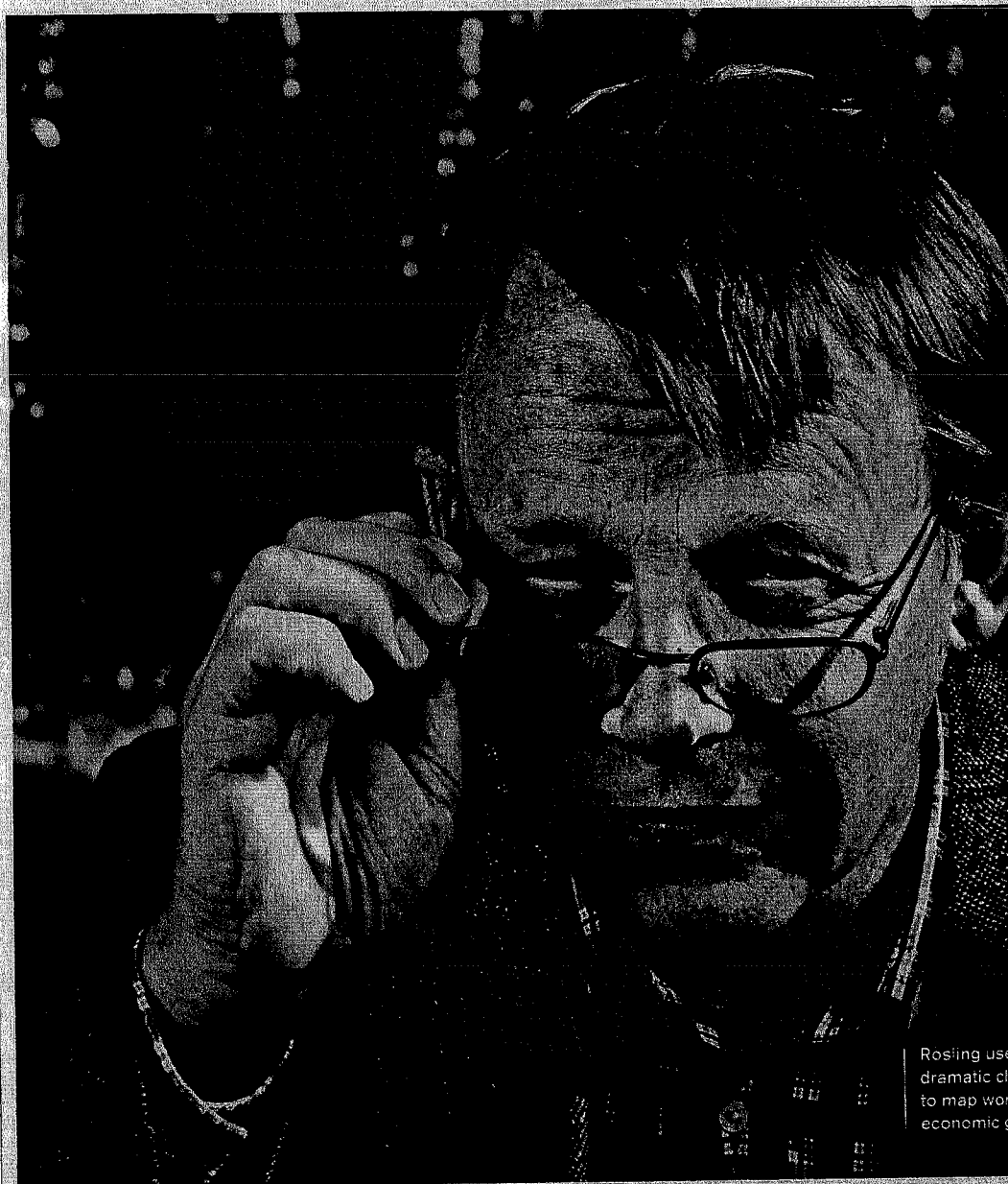
Charts by  
David Foster

## 128%

Increase in Chinese life expectancy (from 32 years to 73) between 1960 and 2008

Data: Gapminder.org

Hans Rosling offers an antidote to people grown weary of pessimism. Videos of the 61-year-old Swedish doctor and medical professor have drawn well over 1 million views on YouTube. His specialty: harnessing statistics to illustrate dramatically how economic progress has made the world better. Using a bubble to represent each country, his charts map rapid gains across the globe on his Gapminder.org Web site. While Rosling, a co-founder of Doctors Without Borders, also studies scourges such as the HIV epidemic, he argues that history offers cause for hope. He has seen horrors: tracking a rare paralytic disease, konzo, for years in rural Africa, for



Rosling uses dramatic charts to map world economic growth.

instance. But he has seen progress: He sleuthed out konzo's cause—hunger and poorly processed cassava—thus helping prevent the disease from spreading. Chief of Correspondents Joseph Weber recently spoke with Rosling.

**You've tracked such measures as income, fertility, oil consumption, and bad teeth across the globe. What do your data show about the speed and evenness of progress?** They show convergence. Most countries are slowly becoming more similar. It is shocking to some. I looked at the basic family realities: How many children do you have? How do they survive? Much of the world is already similar—two

to three children and an average longevity of more than 65 years. One of my favorite comparisons is between the U.S. and Vietnam. In terms of life span and family size, Vietnam is just one generation behind. If you look at paychecks, it's four generations behind.

**You've found this is typical for most of Asia and the Arab world.**

It's surprising that so many big countries, like Egypt and Brazil, have lowered child mortality 50% to 100% faster than Sweden ever did. And Sweden gave development money to China up to last year! You can provide a lot of things to China, but they don't need development money. They are the ones lending to the U.S., so why should Sweden give them money?

**The recession has swept the globe with extraordinary speed. Will recovery be as swift?** I use International Monetary Fund projections. When I take the country bubbles back to 1970 and run the world projections forward to 2014, you hardly see the crisis. It's just like a short tango. The world has taken two steps backward, some countries more than others, but China [following its own upward path] does not tango!

**This crisis may mean a faster catch-up for China.**

The big risk with this crisis is that the world gets shortsighted, and we don't address the major long-term issues such as trade imbalances and subsidies for agriculture that hurt poorer countries. In post-industrial societies, the economy is about developments a quarter ahead. In India and China, they think in [terms of] decades and generations.

**In the long sweep—say, 25 to 50 years—how do you believe this recession will rank?**

It depends on what happens in the streets in Tehran and the mountains of Pakistan. Things can go very wrong. But we have to thank [former] President George Bush for seeing that the power has shifted from the G7 to the G20. [In 2008 he invited leaders from the world's top 20 economic powers to a summit in Washington.] The top 20 world leaders now have the ability to speak to one another. China and the U.S. can discuss and coordinate stimulus packages.

**As a result of this recession, would you expect the U.S. to fall behind other countries?** We don't need to worry about falling behind. It wasn't bad for Sweden when Finland got wealthy. It isn't bad for the U.S. that Canada is

## RANDOM REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

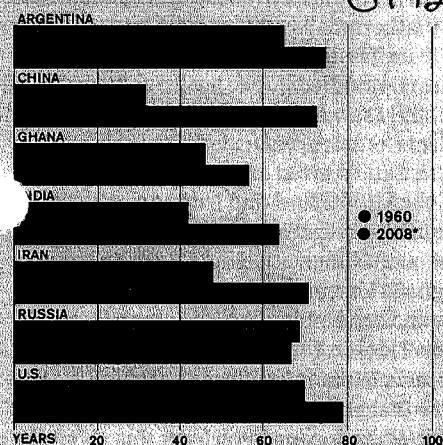


Recessions aren't all bad. Health tends to improve during those periods, for one thing. When the unemployment rate rises by one percentage point, the death rate falls close to half a percentage point, according to research by Christopher Ruhm of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Ruhm finds declines in traffic deaths, heart attacks, severe obesity, smoking, and heavy drinking. Mental health does suffer, however. And a Yale study finds that the eating and drinking problems of people over 50 tend to get worse in downturns.

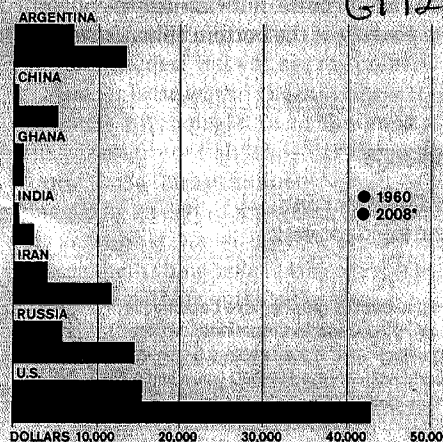
## LONGER LIVES, LARGER INCOMES

Around the globe, lifespans are dramatically increasing, and incomes are rising

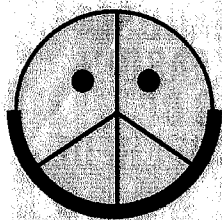
LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH



INCOME PER PERSON



\*2008 based on projections  
Data: [www.gapminder.org/world](http://www.gapminder.org/world)



True, this last one isn't about economics, but it's kinda sweet. Natalia Paruz, who plays the musical saw in New York subway stations, says her music recently managed to get a Christian family, a Jewish family, and a Muslim family into a conversation. In an e-mail, Paruz writes: "If people can relate on a personal level like that—then there is hope that world peace might be possible after all."

wealthy and healthy. It is not a matter of falling behind, but to rise and live together.

#### Is there any cause for celebration now?

The rise of the G20. The arrogance and backward-looking attitude of the West has come to an end. I joke that President Bush asked the Prime Minister of England for money and he didn't have any, so they flew to Brazil, Saudi Arabia, China, and Russia. At Davos the Chinese President was asked if he had any advice for the new U.S. President, and he said: "Yes, be kind to those from whom you borrow money."

We also don't have conflicts between the major powers. China is not trying to shoot at Russia, and Saudi Arabia is not at war with Iran.

#### Are there areas where you are pessimistic?

Could we end up with a war between the U.S. and China? We had war with Britain and Germany and Japan and the U.S. We have a climate crisis. My worry is that in this post-industrial society we become unable to take action looking 25 to 50 years ahead. The system can be so shortsighted and xenophobic.

#### What do your data show about the growth of such countries as China compared with the U.S. and the West broadly?

Countries such as Afghanistan and Somalia are the ones to be concerned about. As the gap between China and the West is closing, there's a new gap between the emerging economies and the bottom billion. The Prime Minister of Mozambique once said building a nation is like building an airplane: You better finish the construction before you start flying. You have to get basics like schools, a middle class, and banking to succeed. This happened in emerging economies but not yet in the poorest nations.

#### We've seen substantial state intervention to reverse the economic downturn. Do your data suggest this is good or bad?

[The U.S.] thrives due to past government investments in infrastructure, education, and health. In finance, it's astonishing to me that the U.S. failed to regulate the markets this time, because they obviously could not regulate themselves. The Swedish public health service produces better health at a lower cost than the U.S. version, but the U.S. system produces better service for many minor conditions.

#### You've swallowed a sword on stage to demonstrate how "the seemingly impossible is possible." What do you mean by that, in economic and social terms?

Circuses are wonderful for showing the seemingly impossible. If you compare India now with when I visited it as a student, you see the change. Big families in a stagnant economy are replaced by small families in a fast-growth economy. Africa is also transformed, from premedieval societies to 19th century industrial economies. There may be stupid leaders and too much poverty, but a lot of success. Just look at Ghana! If you grow 7% a year, you double your [gross domestic product] in 10 years.

#### You seem quite optimistic. Why, especially since you have studied such troubling phenomena as hunger in struggling nations?

Maybe because I am living my second life. When I was 30 years old, I had testicular cancer, and I said farewell to my first life. But a full dose of radiation saved me. I'm now 61, and I've lived most of my life after my cancer. I celebrate that.

My father was a coffee roaster, and I was the first in my family to go to school for more than six years. I studied public health in Bangalore in 1972, and I saw huge poverty but also very good students and flourishing industry. I've worked in Africa and started university collaborations with the Middle East and Latin America. I've done field surveys in Cuba, where I spent a full night quarrelling with Fidel Castro on study design. So I have been able to experience many leaps and dead ends of human progress.

Now I look at the data and take a fact-based approach. It's not that I'm an optimist; it's that I know that child mortality in Egypt has fallen to 4%. When you are knowledgeable about the actual progress of the world, you become labeled as an optimist. But I am deeply concerned by the poverty of the bottom billion. | BW |

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#### Picture This

Hans Rosling's dynamic bubble graphs have become his trademark. To view samples, head to Gapminder.org, the Web site of Rosling's "fact tank." It features a 4.5-minute video on how the world has changed in 200 years and a clip charting the correlation between income and breast cancer.

To check out Gapminder, go to <http://bx.businessweek.com/data-visualization/reference/>

