

HOPEFUL GEOGRAPHY

The world is awful.
The world is much better.
The world can be much better.

Max Roser, Our World in Data, July 20, 2022

Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/much-better-awful-can-be-better>

It is wrong to think that these three statements contradict each other. We need to see that they are all true to see that a better world is possible.

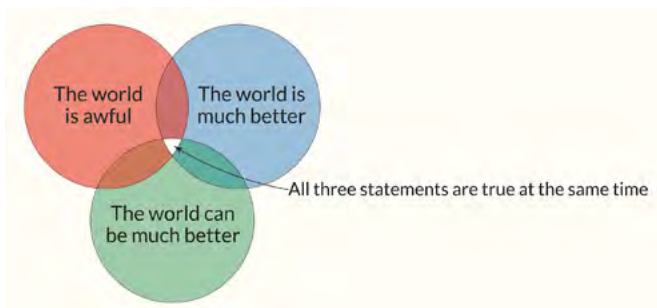
The world is awful. The world is much better. The world can be much better. All three statements are true at the same time.

Discussions about the state of the world too often focus on the first statement: The news highlights what is going wrong, rarely mentioning any positive development.

A pushback on this narrative takes it to the other extreme, which is equally damaging. Solely communicating the progress that the world has achieved becomes unhelpful, or even repugnant, when it glosses over the problems that are real today.

It's hard to resist falling for only one of these perspectives. But to see that a better world is possible we need to see that both are true at the same time, the world is awful, and the world is much better.

To illustrate what I mean, I will use the example of one of humanity's biggest tragedies: the death of its children. But the same is true for many of the world's other problems. Humanity faces many problems where things have improved over time, which are still terrible, and for which we know that things can get better.¹



The world is awful

Globally 4.3% of children die before they are 15 years old. This is the data for 2020, the latest available year.

This means that 5.9 million children die every year –

16,000 children on any average day, and 11 children every minute.²

Clearly, a world where thousands of tragedies happen every single day is awful.



The world is much better

History's big lesson is that things change. But it is hard to imagine how dire living conditions once were and that makes it difficult to grasp just how much the world has changed.

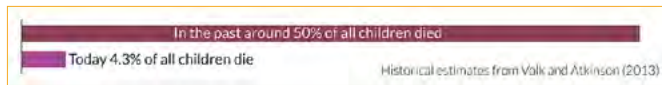
Data can help to bring the scale change to mind. Historians estimate that in the past around half of all children died before they reached the end of puberty. This was true no matter where in the world a child was born and it only started to change in the 19th century, just a few generations ago.³

It's hard to imagine, but child mortality in the very worst-off places today is much better than anywhere in the past. Even in the world's richest countries the mortality of children was much higher very recently. In Somalia, the country with the highest mortality today, about 14% of all children die.⁴ Just a few generations ago the mortality rate was more than three-times as high, even in the best-off places.⁵

What we learn from our history is that it is possible to change the world. Unfortunately, long-run data on how living conditions have changed is rarely studied in school and rarely reported in the media. As a result, many are entirely unaware of even the most fundamental positive developments in the world.

HOPEFUL GEOGRAPHY: OUR WORLD IN DATA

But this fact – that it is possible to change the world and achieve extraordinary progress for entire societies – is something that everyone should know.



The world can be much better

Progress over time shows that it was possible to change the world in the past, but do we know that it's possible to continue this progress into the future? Or were we perhaps born at that unlucky moment in history at which progress has to come to a halt?

Studying the global data suggests that the answer is no.

One way to see this is to look at the places in the world with the best living conditions today. The best-off places show that extremely low child mortality is not just a possibility but is already a reality.

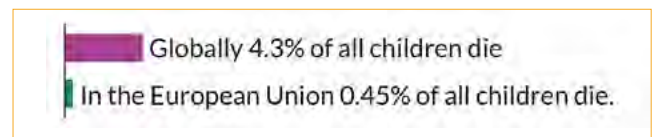
The world region where children have the best chance of surviving childhood is the European Union. 99.55% of all children born in the EU survive childhood.⁶

To see how much better the world can be, we can ask what the world would look like if this became the reality everywhere. What if children around the world would be as well off as children in the EU? Five million fewer children would die every year.⁷

Of course, the child mortality rate in the EU is still too high, and there is no reason that progress should stop there. Cancers like leukemia and brain tumors kill hundreds of children, even in today's richest countries. We should strive to find ways to prevent these tragic deaths.

However, the largest opportunities to prevent the pain and suffering of children are in the poorer countries. There we know not only that things can be better, but how to make them better.

Research on how to prevent child deaths and the fact that child mortality in entire world regions is 10-fold lower than the global average show what is possible. Millions of child deaths are preventable. We know that it is possible to make the world a better place.



The world is awful, this is why we need to know about progress

The news often focuses on how awful the world is. There is a large audience for bad news and it is easier to scare people than to encourage them to achieve positive change.

Our World in Data

All three statements are true at the same time:

Globally 4.3% of all children die before they are 15 years old.
5.9 million children die every year.

→ The world is awful

In the past around 50% of all children died

Today 4.3% of all children die

→ The world is much better

Globally 4.3% of all children die

In the European Union 0.45% of all children die.

→ The world can be much better

Data: 2020 data from UN IGME and historical data from Volk and Atkinson (2013).

OurWorldinData.org – Research and data to make progress against the world's largest problems.

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I agree that it is important that we know what is wrong with the world. But, given the scale of what we have achieved already and of what is possible in the future, I think it's irresponsible to only report on how awful our situation is.

To see that the world has become a better place does not mean to deny that we are facing very serious problems. To the contrary, if we had achieved the best of all possible worlds I wouldn't spend my life writing and researching about how we got here. It is because the world is still terrible that it is so important to see how the world became a better place.

I wish we could change our culture so that we take this possibility of progress more seriously. This is a solvable problem: we have the data and the research, but we are currently not using it. The data is often stored in inaccessible databases, the research locked away behind paywalls and buried under jargon in academic papers. With Our World in Data we want to change this.

If we want more people to dedicate their energy and money to making the world a better place, then we should make it much more widely known that it is possible to make the world a better place.

Our World in Data presents the data and research to make progress against the world's largest problems. This is a revised and updated version published in July 2022. The first version of this post was published in October 2018.

Endnotes

1. In a number of fundamental aspects – obviously not all – we achieved very substantial progress. These aspects include education, political freedom, violence, poverty, nutrition, and some aspects of environmental change. See also my short history of global living conditions.
2. Except for the historical data, all data in this post is taken from IGME, the UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation. They publish their data here: childmortality.org/data/World
Their point estimate for the global number of deaths for children under 5 in 2020 is 5,040,610 Their estimate of deaths of children between the ages of 5 and 14 is 868,942. The sum is $5,040,610 + 868,942 = 5,909,552$
This means on average there are:
 $5,909,552 / 365.25 = 16,180$ child deaths per day,

$5,909,552 / (365.25 * 24) = 674.1$ child deaths every hour, and

$5,909,552 / (365.25 * 24 * 60) = 11.2$ child deaths every minute

3. If we still suffered the poor health of our ancestors more than 60 million children would die every year. How many children actually died at the time we don't know, because data of the number of global births at the time is not available. For the 1950s and 1960s we have estimates of both the number of births and the mortality rate and the records show that around 20 million children died every year. See the data shown here.
4. See our chart of the mortality of under-15-year-olds. See the data reported in Mortality in the past – around half died as children.
If we look at single countries this difference becomes even more striking as in the countries with the best health the child mortality rate is again almost twice as low as in the EU as a whole.
The countries with the lowest mortality rates today are San Marino, Iceland, Norway, Singapore, and Slovenia where more than 99.7% of all children survive. This chart shows the ranking. But because several of these countries are small, I did not base this text on the data from any single country, but on a large world region where millions of children are born every year.
7. The global number of child deaths, as reported above, is 5,909,552.
 $5,909,552 - 5,909,552 / (4.3 / 0.45) = 5,291,111$ fewer children would die if the global mortality rate was 0.45% rather than 4.5%.

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The short history of global living conditions and why it matters that we know it

Max Roser, Our World in Data

We are working on Our World in Data to provide 'Research and data to make progress against the world's largest problems'.

Our mission only makes sense if it is in fact possible to make progress against the large problems the world faces. **Very few think the world is making progress.** A 2015 survey asked "All things considered, do you think the world is getting better or worse, or neither getting better nor worse?". **In Sweden 10% thought things are getting better, in the US they were only 6%, and in Germany only 4%.**

What is the evidence that we need to consider when answering this question?

The question is how the world has changed and so we must take a historical perspective. And the question is about the world as a whole and the answer must therefore consider everybody. The answer must consider the history of global living conditions – a history of everyone.

The motivation for this history of global living conditions was the survey result that documented **the very negative perspective on global development that most of us have. More than 9 out of 10 people do not think that the world is getting better.** How does that fit with the empirical evidence?

I do not think that the media are the only ones to blame, but I do think that they are to blame for some part of this. This is because **the media does not tell us how the world is changing, it tells us what in the world goes wrong.**

One reason why the media focuses on things that go wrong is that the media focuses on single events and single events are often bad – look at the news: plane crashes, terrorism attacks, natural disasters. Positive developments on the other hand often happen very slowly and never make the headlines.

The result of a media – and education system – that fails to present quantitative information on long-run developments is that the huge majority of people is very ignorant about global development and has little hope that progress against serious problems is even possible.

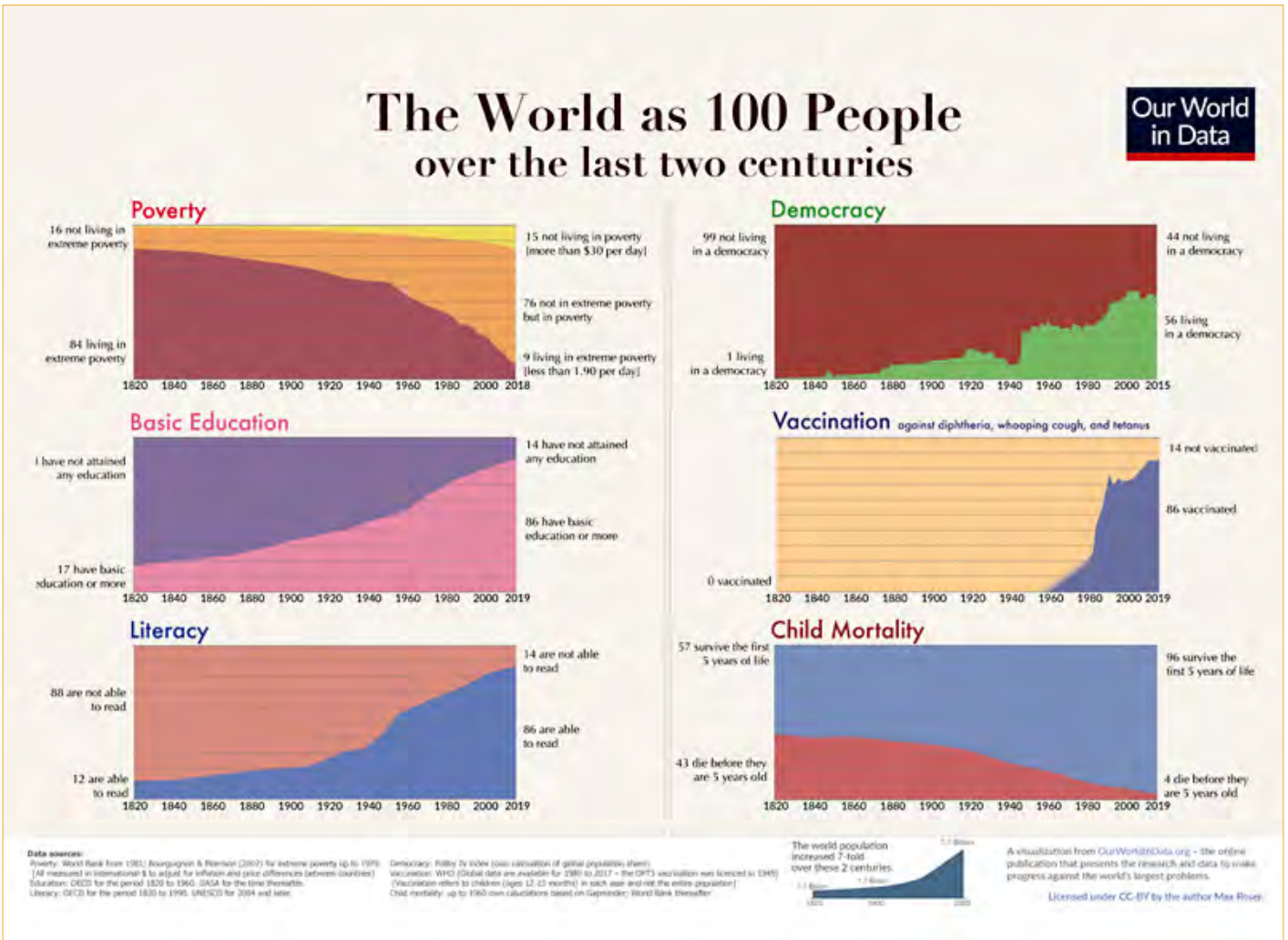
Even the decline of global extreme poverty – by any standard one of the most important developments in our lifetime – is only known by a small fraction of the population of the UK (10%) or the US (5%). In both countries the majority of people think that the share of people living in extreme poverty has increased. Two thirds in the US even think the share in extreme poverty has 'almost doubled'. **When we are ignorant about the basic facts about global development it is not surprising that few have the hope that the world can get better.**

The only way to tell a history of everyone is to use statistics, only then can we hope to get an overview over the lives of the 22 billion people that lived in the last 200 years.

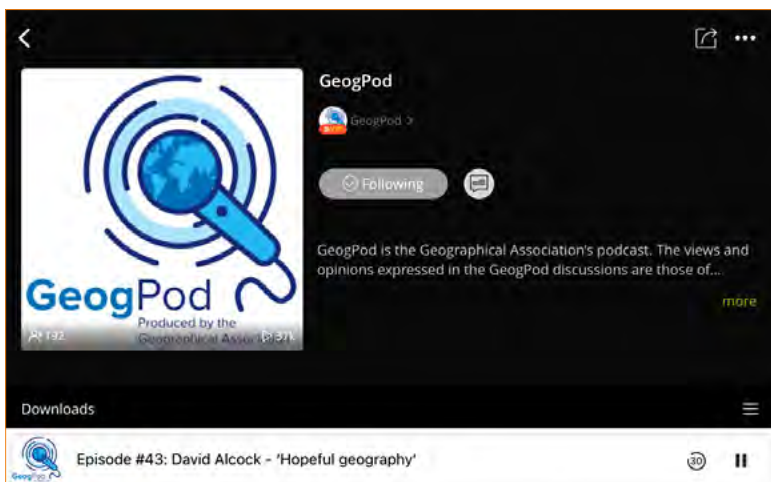
The developments that these statistics reveal transform our global living conditions – slowly but steadily. They are reported in this online publication – [Our World in Data](#) – that my team and I have been building over the last years. We see it as a resource to show these long-term developments and thereby complement the information in the news that focus on events.

To make it easier for myself and for you to understand the transformation in living conditions that we have achieved I made a summarising visualisation in which I imagine this 200-year history as the history of a group of 100 people to see how the lives of them would have changed if they lived through this transformative period of the modern world. It shows at once some of the very largest problems that we face and the progress that the last generations have made.

HOPEFUL GEOGRAPHY: OUR WORLD IN DATA



PODCASTS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING



Source: <https://www.geography.org.uk/GeogPod-The-GAs-Podcast>

GeogPod is a series of podcasts produced by the Geographical Association of the UK.

The podcasts cover a wide range of geographical content appropriate at a global scale.

For the theme of this edition, I highly recommend Podcast No 43 – an interview with David Alcock about **Hopeful Geography**.

Two of David's blogs follow in this edition.

Editor.