

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

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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.

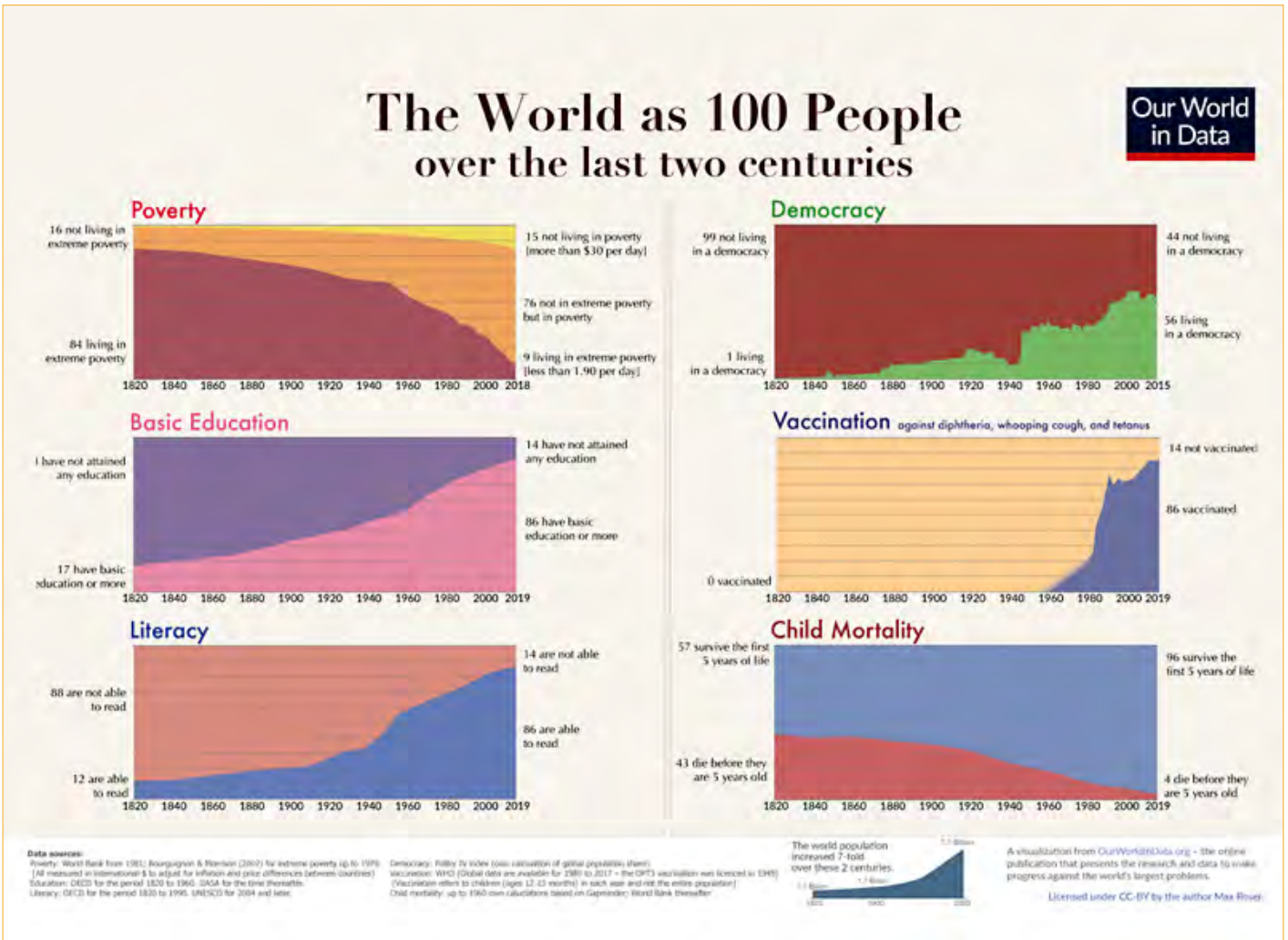
Even the decline of global extreme poverty – by any standard one of the most important developments in our lifetime – is only known by a small fraction of the population of the UK (10%) or the US (5%). In both countries the majority of people think that the share of people living in extreme poverty has 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.

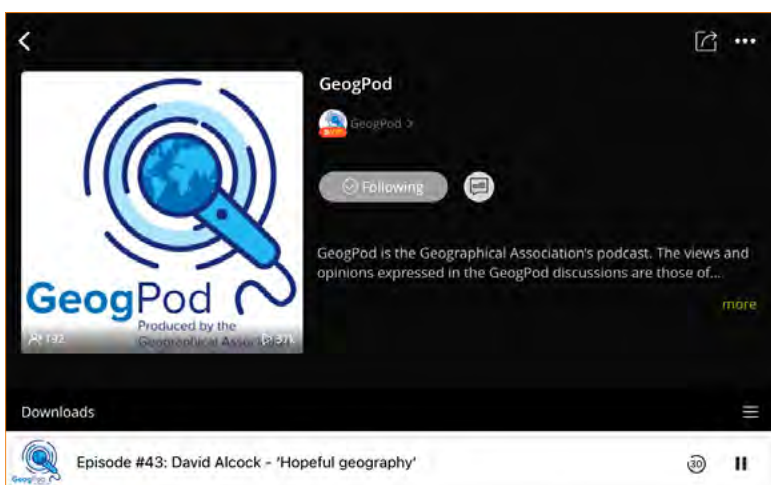
The developments that these statistics reveal transform our global living conditions – slowly but steadily. They are reported in this online publication – [Our World in Data](#) – that my team and I have been building over the last years. We see it as a resource to show these long-term developments and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

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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.