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Why The World Is Getting Better And Why Hardly Anyone Knows It



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Leadership Strategy

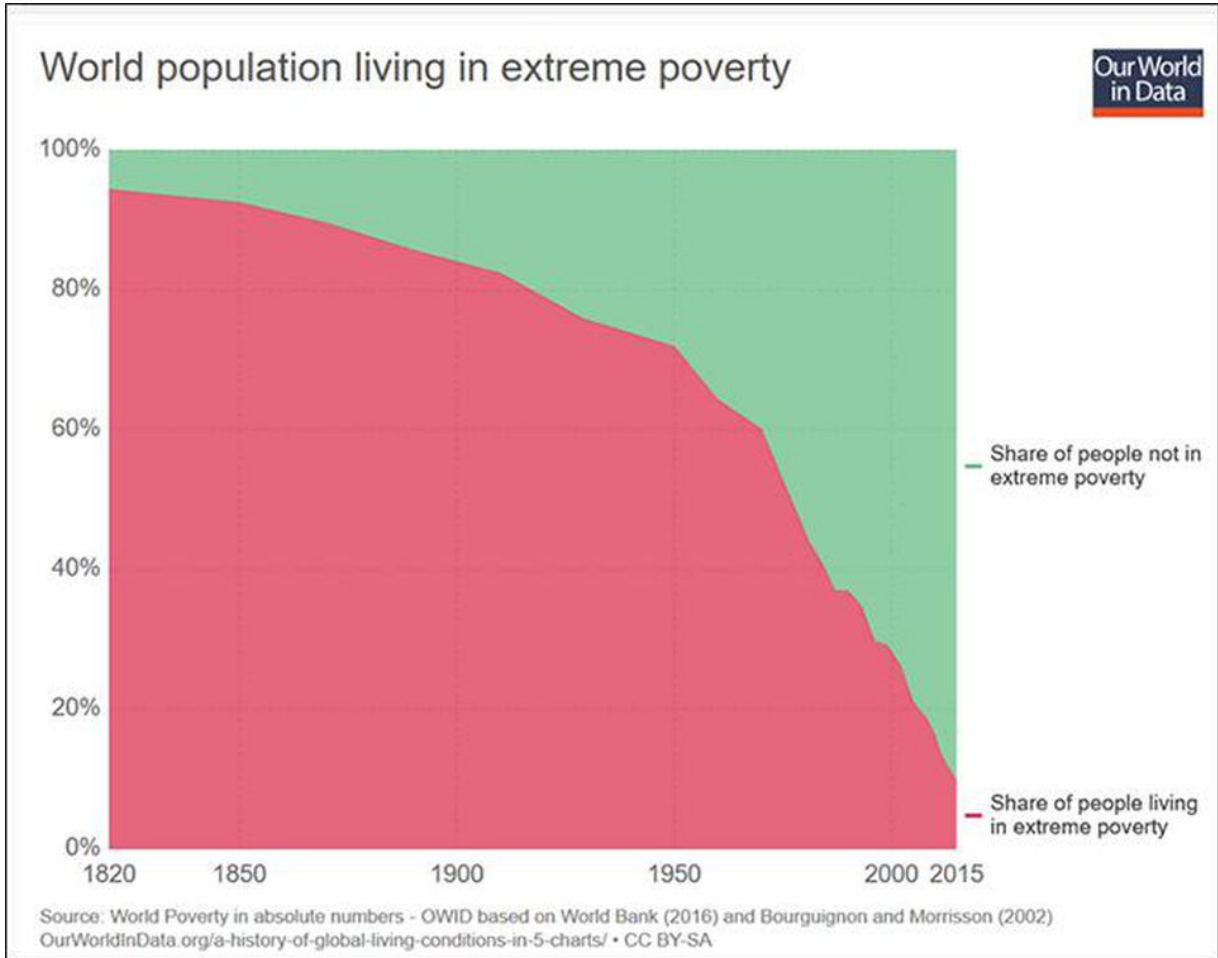
I write about Agile management, leadership, innovation & narrative.



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Read the news and you can see that the world is going to hell in hand-basket—and fast! Terrorism, nuclear weapons, economic stagnation, social unrest, autocratic leaders, structural unemployment, deskilling, growing hopelessness, the opioid epidemic, increasing inequality, xenophobia, economic migrations, recessions, financial bubbles and crashes, recessions, depressions—the list goes on.

So, when a recent [survey](#) asked “All things considered, do you think the world is getting better or worse?” the results were predictably bleak. In Sweden only 10% thought things are getting better, and in the U.S., it was only 6%. Hardly anyone thinks the world is getting better.



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And yet the facts show otherwise. In a powerful study entitled “[The short history of global living conditions and why it matters that we know it](#)” by [Max Roser](#), an economist at the University of Oxford and the founder of *Our World in Data*, we learn that on virtually all of the key dimensions of human material well-being—poverty, literacy, health, freedom, and education—the world is an extraordinarily better place than it was just a couple of centuries ago.

Let’s take a look.

1. Poverty

Even the [Bible](#) tells us that “The poor you will always have with you.” And it's customary to see poverty as so intractable, even insoluble, that organizations like the World Bank might as well try boiling the ocean. Statistics show otherwise. Massive gains have been made in reducing extreme poverty, particularly in the last 50 years. Some countries that are now rich were poor just a few decades ago.

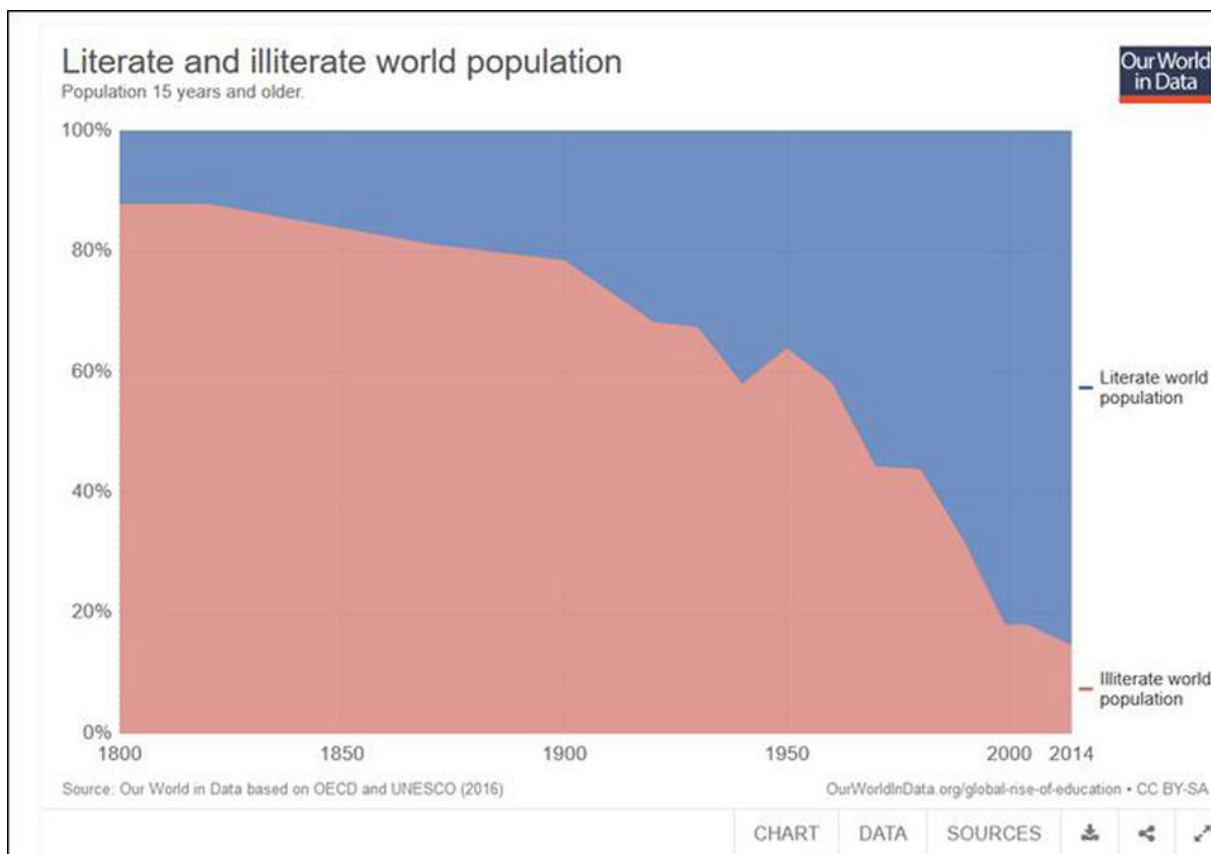
Two hundred years ago, only a privileged few were not living in extreme poverty. For all the ills of industrialization, increased productivity made it possible to lift steadily more people out of extreme poverty. At first, the progress was steady: in 1950 75% of the world were still living in extreme poverty. But today, those living in extreme poverty are now less than 10%.

This is an extraordinary achievement, particularly because the world population has increased seven-fold over the last two centuries. Vital goods and services became less scarce: more food, better clothing, better housing and indoor plumbing.

Amid the flurry of bad news in the media, it's easy to miss how far and how fast we have come. As the media is obsessed with reporting events where things have gone wrong, it is easy to overlook this extraordinary fact: “every single day since 1990, since, on average, there were 130,000 people fewer in extreme poverty every day.”

2. Literacy

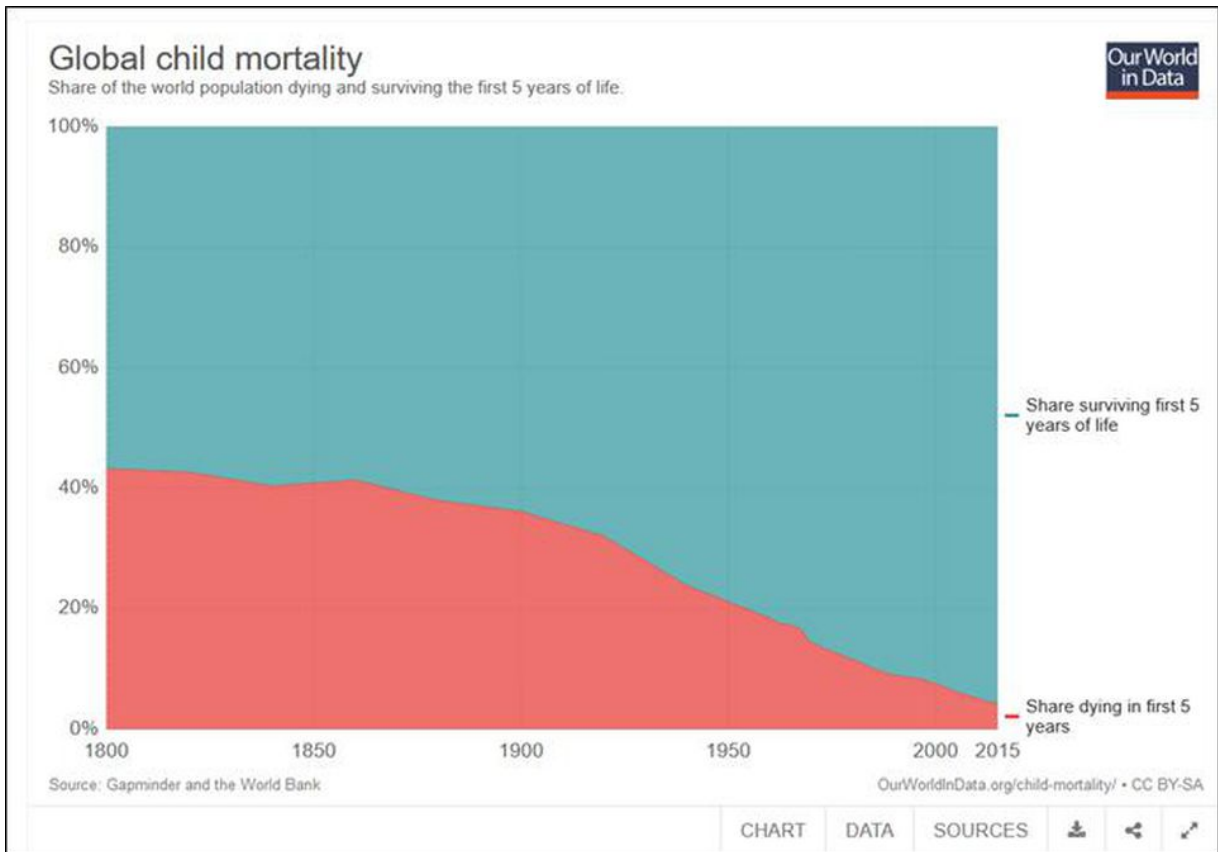
The education story is equally encouraging. Data shows that the share of the world population that is [literate](#) over the last 2 centuries has gone from a tiny elite to a world where 8 out of 10 people can read and write.



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3. Health

Progress in health is equally astonishing. A key reason for our surprise? We don't know how bad things used to be. In 1800, more than 40% of the world's newborns died before the age of five. Now only a tiny fraction die before the age of five. How come? Modern medicine helped, particularly the discovery of germs, but even more important were improvements in housing, sanitation, and diet.

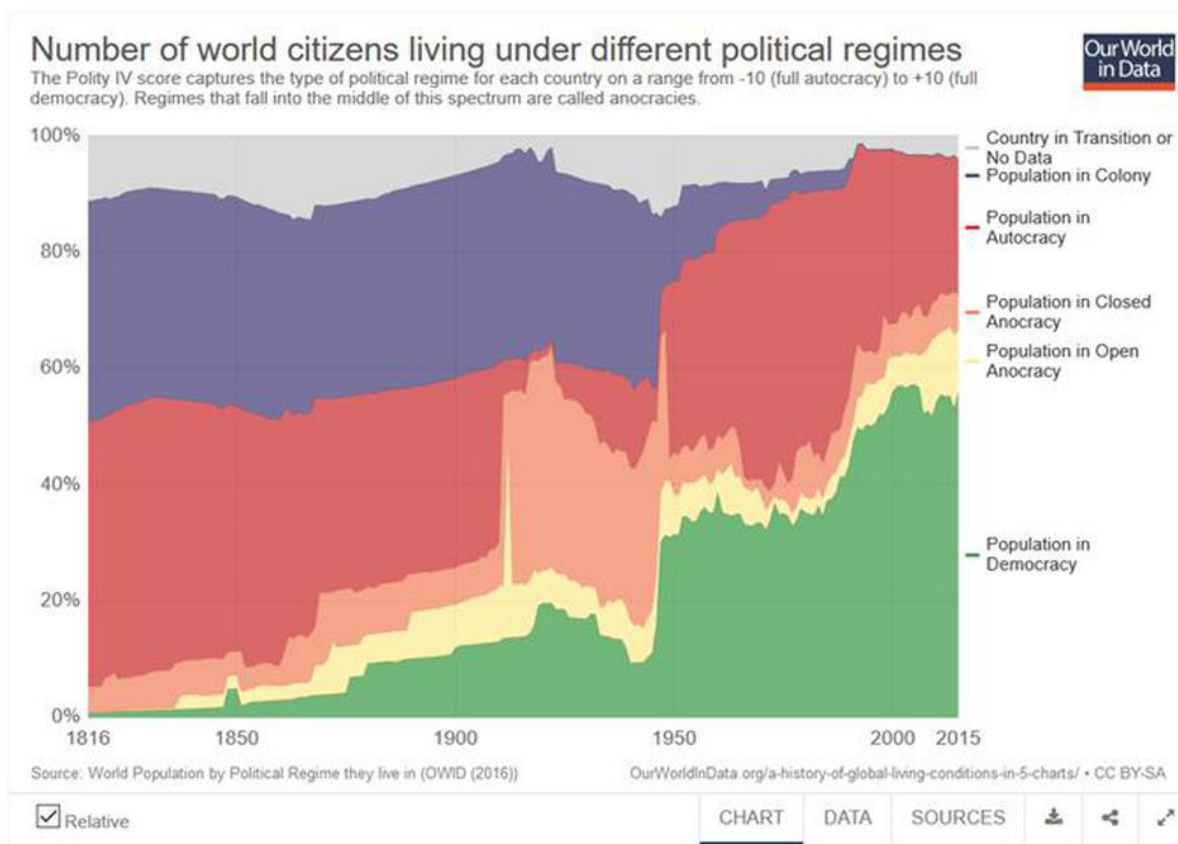


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4. Freedom

Political freedom has also made progress. Given the emergence of populist leaders and dictators around the world, it's easy to underestimate what's happened in establishing political freedom and civil liberties, which are “both a means for development and an end of development.”

Freedom is notoriously hard to measure, and Our World In Data group uses an index of democracy as “the **least problematic** of the measures that present a long term perspective.” This index suggests that in the 19th Century almost everyone lived in autocratically ruled countries. Today more than half the global population lives in a democracy. “The huge majority of those living in an autocracy – 4 out of 5 – live in one autocratic country: China.”



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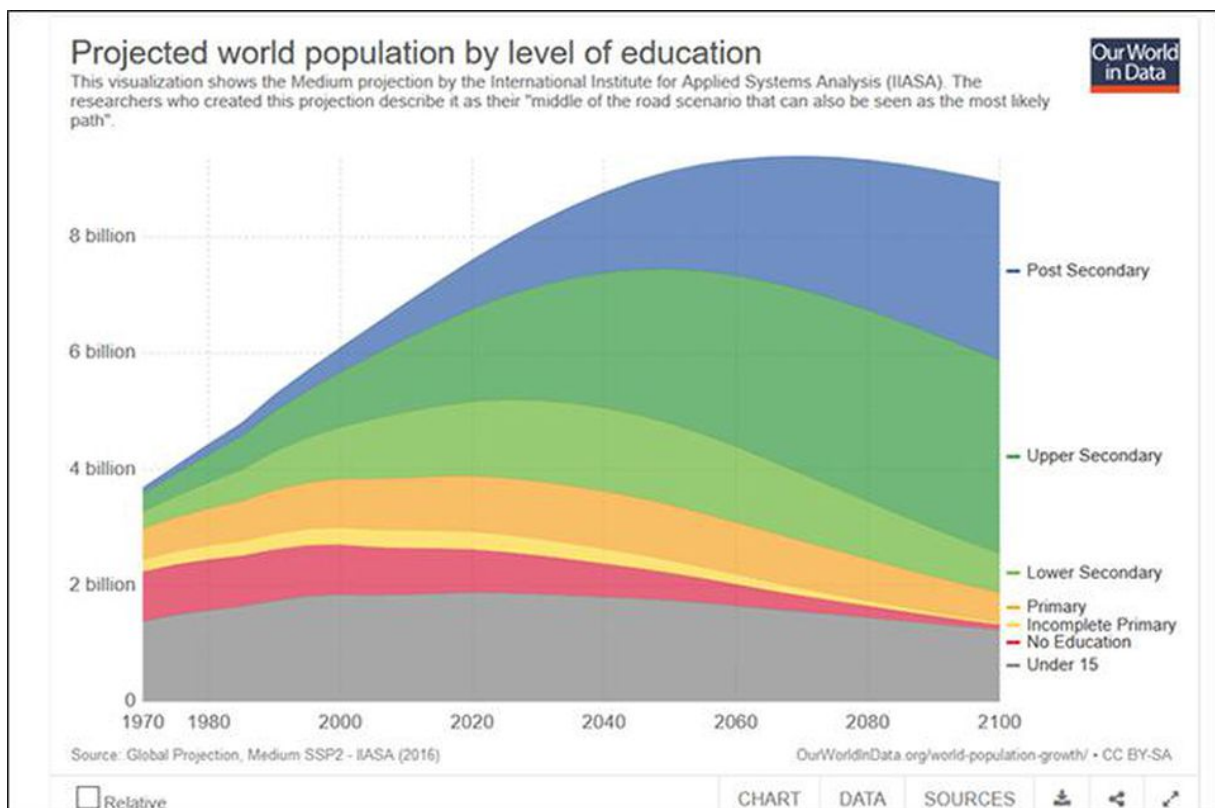
5. Population

World population was around 1 billion in the year 1800 and increased seven times since then. In one sense, this is a great achievement. Better health means that humans stopped dying at the rate of our ancestors. In effect, “humanity started to win the fight against death. Global life expectancy **doubled** just over the last hundred years.”

In another sense, though, population growth increased demand for resources and aggravated humanity’s impact on the environment. But population growth isn’t unlimited. “Once women realize that the chances of their children dying has declined substantially they adapt and chose to have fewer children. Population growth then comes to an end.”

6 Education

All these gains were enabled by improvements in knowledge and education. And education continues to improve globally. In this area, Our World In Data forecasts a future where education will continue on its improvement path. “With today’s lower global fertility, the researchers expect that the number of children will decline from now – there will never be more children on the planet than today.” It is expected that world population will peak in 2070 and to decline thereafter. “With the great importance of education for improving health, increasing political freedom, and ending poverty, this projection is very encouraging.”



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Why Don't We Know The World Is Getting Better?

It's ironic that in a world where knowledge and education are improving dramatically, there is widespread abysmal ignorance about the improving state of the world. “More than 9 out of 10 people do not think that the world is getting better.”

Our World In Data suggests that the media are partly to blame. The media does not tell us how the world is changing, it tells us where the world is going wrong. It tends to focus on single events particularly single events that have gone bad. By contrast, positive developments happen slowly with no particular event to promote in a headline. “More people are healthy today than yesterday,” just doesn’t cut it.

The result is that most people are ignorant about how the state of the world has changed. In both the U.K. and the U.S. most 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’.”

The Challenges Ahead

Obviously big problems remain. Having 1 out of 10 people living in extreme poverty today is unacceptable. Humanity’s impact on the environment is at a level that is not sustainable and we urgently need to reduce our impact. Continuing threats to our political freedom and liberty must be dealt with. Future gains are by no means assured. It is hard to see how we are going to solve many of the remaining problems.

The picture painted by these statistics is also technocratic and global in perspective. It is no solace to an individual family that is suffering to learn that the global picture of human welfare has improved over several centuries. If we talk to the people moved from their land by force or driven into tall apartment buildings, it is no comfort to learn about rising income counted in dollars, if prices are rising faster. Human value and values are not adequately reflected in zero dollar income in a spreadsheet.

Yet there are grounds for cautious optimism.

First, the fact that future progress is hard to predict doesn’t make it unlikely. Thus, it’s hard to imagine anyone in the year 1800 forecasting the progress that was about to be made on all these fronts over the next two centuries.

Today, pessimists have the megaphone and predict almost certain doom for humanity. Yet could that all be part of the humanity's stumbling effort towards bettering itself?

Second, although easy gains have been made and harder challenges lie ahead, we now know much more about the solutions. For instance, we know that the key to population limits is getting people out of poverty: above \$10,000 per capita, population growth drops precipitously. Paradoxically, the key to saving the environment is growing faster!

Third, we are discovering that global poverty reduction has been a success, not a failure. When people believe that they are failing, they risk losing faith in each other. Greater awareness of our history can build confidence to tackle the remaining problems.

Fourth, we have learned much about how to collaborate. International institutions and global compacts have been set up. Track records have been established. "Solving problems – big problems – is always a collaborative undertaking. And the group of people that is able to work together today is a much, much stronger group than there ever was on this planet. We have just seen the change over time; the world today is healthier, richer, and better educated."

Fifth, we now know much more about how to adapt. The idea that we should do things today as we did them yesterday has given way to a realization that if further progress is to be made, we must learn to adapt even faster.

Management practices that aim at preserving the status quo are bottlenecks in the effort to achieve further progress. Innovation must be continuous if we are to master the challenges that lie before us. In a world of accelerating change, and increasing complexity, organizations must learn how to **become more agile**.

And read also:

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