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The Future of the World

Thing we're all going to hell in a handbasket? Think things can't possibly get any better? The 43-year-old political economist and environmental activist begs to differ.

By: Bjørn Lomborg



When thinking about the future, it is fashionable to be pessimistic. Yet the evidence unequivocally belies such pessimism. Over the past centuries, humanity's lot has improved dramatically — in the developed world, where it is rather obvious, but also in the developing world, where life expectancy has more than doubled in the past 100 years. Malnutrition has dropped from 50 percent in 1950 to 17 percent today, and poverty from 50 percent to 25 percent. Access to clean drinking water has gone up from 30 percent in 1970 to 80 percent today, while illiteracy has dropped from 80 percent to 20 percent. Consider this: The most pessimistic UN predictions expect

the average Bangladeshi in 2100 to be as rich as the average Dutchman is today.

In the rich world, the environmental situation has improved dramatically. In the United States, the most important environmental indicator, particulate air pollution, has been cut by more than half since 1955, rivers and coastal waters have dramatically improved, and forests are increasing. And these trends are generally shared by all developed countries.

Yet we constantly fear that the future will overwhelm us, though this often comes from faulty analysis. We worry about the seemingly ever-increasing number of natural catastrophes. Yet this is mainly a consequence of CNN — we see many more, but the number is roughly constant, and we manage to deal much better with them over time. Globally, the death rate from catastrophes has dropped about fifty-fold over the past century. We also worry that global warming will increase flooding and hurricane damage. And yes, sea levels will rise by up to two feet over the coming century. But we must remember that over the last 150 years, sea levels rose one foot, and nobody noticed. We adapted.

This underscores our need to start thinking smartly about challenges to our natural environment. Often our intuition will focus on the spectacular problems like climate change or deforestation, but that is not necessarily the best place to intervene. Silent and dispersed problems are often much more important.

The main environmental challenge of the 21st century is poverty. When you don't know where your next meal is coming from, it's hard to consider the environment 100 years down the line. When your kids are starving, you will slash-and-burn the rain forest; when you're rich, you'll be a Web designer and vote green.

The single most important environmental problem in the world today is indoor air pollution, causing about 1.5

million deaths annually. It is the result of poor people cooking and heating their homes with dung and cardboard. But the solution is not environmental — to certify dung — but rather economic: to make these people rich enough to afford kerosene.

How do we make a better world? This question was answered by the Copenhagen Consensus project. Eight of the world's top economists (including five Nobel laureates) established a global priority list based on elaborate assessments by 50 leading specialist economists. At the top of the list is preventing malnutrition, followed by free trade, vaccinations, and agricultural R&D. These are the areas in which we can do the most good per dollar for the world. Cutting CO₂ to combat climate change, despite all the media attention, came at the bottom, because it costs a great deal and does little good.

The future of the world will be much better than the past. The trick is to worry about the right things first.

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