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Improving with age

By Marian Tupy - November 10, 2013

Humanity is better off today than it has ever been.

That may surprise you because, after all, we are constantly bombarded by bad news: There is a drawn-out civil war in Syria, continued strife in Egypt, Ethiopian children are forced to work to survive, and women from India to Saudi Arabia are experiencing frequent violence and widespread oppression. Even in the United States, some Americans remain trapped in poverty.

In spite of all the negatives, life for most of humanity is still better than ever.

Throughout history, life was very difficult. Those with ailments spent much of their lives in agonizing pain. Families lived in bug-infested dwellings that offered neither comfort nor privacy. Many worked in the fields from sunrise to sunset, yet hunger and famines were commonplace. Transportation was primitive, and most never traveled beyond their native villages or nearest towns. Ignorance and illiteracy were rife.

People also died young. The average global life expectancy of 30 years did not change from the Stone Age until 1900. Even in the richest countries, life expectancy at the start of the 20th century rarely exceeded 50 years. Average global income per person remained stagnant from the time of Caesar Augustus to the time of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Industrialization and globalization have been transforming our lives, mostly for the better, since the 1800s. Average life expectancy in the world has more than doubled to 68 years, and per-capita annual income has increased more than tenfold, to \$14,000.

It is not only income and life expectancy that are improving, as Harvard professor Steven Pinker wrote: “Violence has been in decline for thousands of years, and today we may be living in the most peaceable era in the existence of our species.”

If anything, the speed of human progress is accelerating. According to Charles Kenny of the Center for Global Development, some “4.9 billion people — the considerable majority of the planet — [live] in countries where GDP has increased more than fivefold over 50 years.”

This acceleration has also led to a substantial reduction in the world's poor. According to research by the Brookings Institution, "between 2005 and 2010, the total number of poor people around the world fell by nearly half a billion . Poverty reduction of this magnitude is unparalleled in history."

More children in poor countries, including girls, attend schools at all levels of education. In Afghanistan, for example, the primary-school enrollment rate for girls rose from zero in 2001 to 79 percent in 2010. While still low, the number of female parliamentarians worldwide increased from 11 percent in 1990 to 19 percent in 2012.

Our lives are not only longer, but also healthier. The global prevalence rate of people infected with HIV-AIDS has been stable since 2001, and deaths from the disease are declining in most countries owing to the increasing availability of antiretroviral drugs. In wealthy countries, some cancer rates have started to fall. That is quite an accomplishment, considering that people are living much longer and that the risk of cancer increases with longevity.

Then there are the everyday improvements we often take for granted. Our dwellings are larger and, in many ways, of better quality. Workers work in safer environments, are more productive, and tend to work fewer hours. That leaves more time for leisure and travel. We have access to a greater array of products that are usually cheaper and of higher quality. To top it all off, humans are experiencing more political and economic freedom.

The list of advances could go on, but the point is that humans have made incredible progress over the past 200 years. Unfortunately, there is a gap between reality and public perception. What we read in the newspapers and see on the news offer important glimpses into the everyday struggles of people around the globe. But it is critical to put things into perspective: Never before have so many people enjoyed so much peace and prosperity.