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The World is Making Progress! An Assessment of Development Successes

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Nowadays, complaints about the lack of development success are ubiquitous. In view of the multitude of problems which are still to be resolved, there may even be some justification for this. But nevertheless there has been substantial development success over recent decades, and within the widespread litany of failure these achievements often receive inadequate recognition.

This paper provides an overview of trends in key indicators covering three areas: socio-economic development, peace and democracy, and environment and climate change. Analysis shows that, over time, substantial progress has been achieved, especially in the first two areas. Particularly noteworthy are the extensive progress made in the area of health and education, the movement towards greater democracy, and the reduction in both individual and collective violence.

This paper does not, of course, seek to gloss over development shortcomings. The aim is rather to raise awareness of development success, not least as a source of motivation for further effort.

Recent development literature portrays the state of development in a gloomy light: *The White Man's Burden* (Easterly 2006), *Dead Aid* (Moyo 2008), *The Bottom Billion* (Collier 2008), *Why Nations Fail* (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). But there have also been contributions, which focus explicitly on

development successes. Along with the 2010 Human Development Report (UNDP 2010), notable examples include George Kenny's *Getting Better* (2011) and Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011).

Building on these latter contributions, this paper aims to sketch out key trends in three areas: (1) socio-economic development, (2) democracy and peace, and (3) environment and climate change.

Socio-economic development

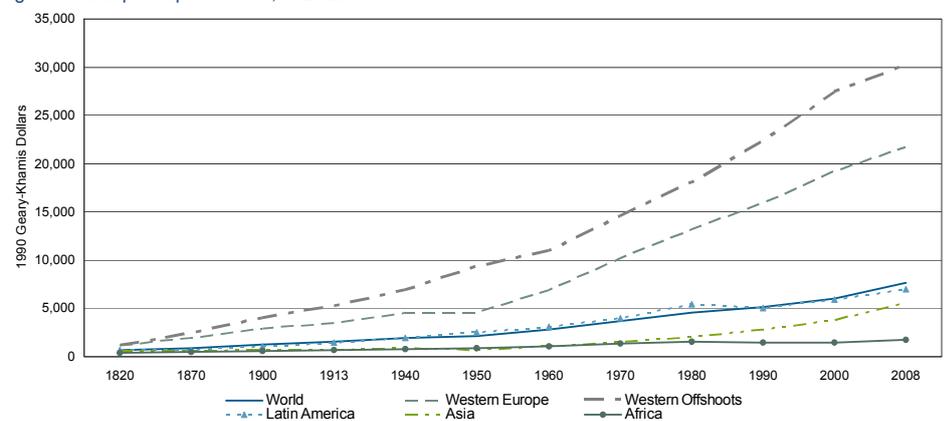
a) Per-capita income significantly increased

Figure 1 shows that the global average real per-capita income climbed from US\$ 666 in 1820 to US\$ 2,111 in 1950, and reached US\$ 7,614 in 2008. By far the largest increase was achieved in Western Europe and its colonial offshoots (USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). But there have

also been substantial increases in real per-capita income in every other part of the world. This applies not just to Asia and Latin America, but also – albeit to a considerably lesser extent – to Africa, where average real per-capita income still nearly doubled between 1950 and 2008, increasing from US\$ 889 to US\$ 1,780.¹ Furthermore, Africa in particular has recently recorded comparatively high income growth (see also Radelet 2010). Over the period from 2000 to 2008, real per-capita income on the African continent rose by about 26% – the second highest growth after Asia.

It is often assumed that the poorest hardly benefit from this growth in average incomes. But over recent decades notable success has also been achieved in relation to the problem of absolute income poverty (UN 2012). Between 1990 and 2008, the average proportion of the global population forced to live on less than US\$ 1.25 per day fell from 47% to 24%. In addition, more recent figures show that the proportion of absolute poor fell further by 2010 – thereby achieving the first Millennium Development Goal (halving the proportion of people living in absolute poverty by 2015) ahead of schedule. Overall, since 1990 the global number of absolute poor has dropped from two billion to less than a billion. By far the greatest success in combating poverty has been seen in Asia, principally in China and India, whilst Sub-Saharan Africa registered least progress. Yet here, too, there

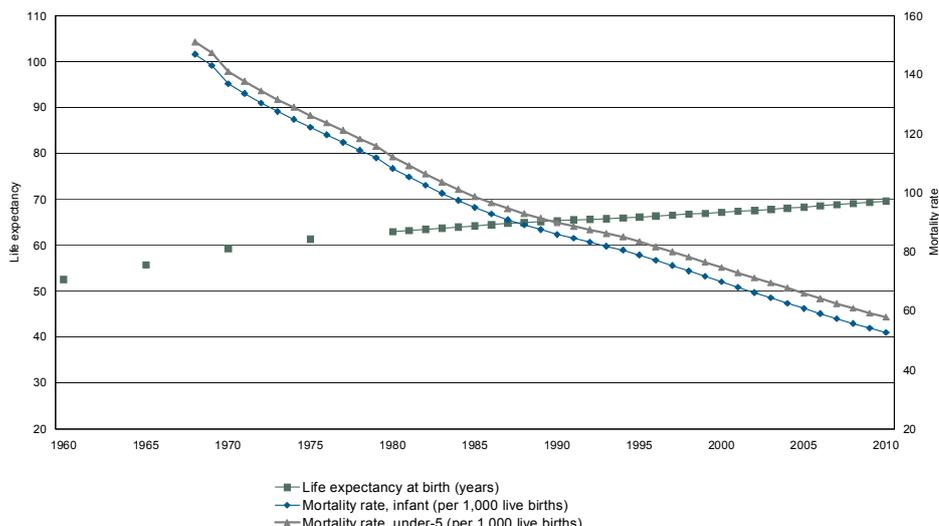
Figure 1: Real per-capita income, 1820-2008



Data source: Maddison (2010)

¹ This growth in average income by no means applies to every country on the African continent. In 2008 there were still 14 African countries whose real per-capita incomes were below their 1960 levels.

Figure 2: Life expectancy, infant and child mortality, 1960-2008



Data source: World Bank (2012)

are signs that the trend is being reversed: between 2005 and 2008 the average poverty rate on the African continent fell from 52% to 47%. At the same time, the absolute number of poor dropped for the first time since 1981 – from 395 million in 2005 to 386 million in 2008.

b) Health: life expectancy substantially improved

There is also substantial progress to report in key social indicators. Perhaps the greatest success has been achieved in the area of health. For example, over the period between 1960 and 2010 global average life expectancy has more than doubled from 31 years to 70 (see Figure 2). Once again the lowest rate of growth has been recorded in Sub-Saharan Africa. Even here, however, average life expectancy rose from 41 in 1960 to 54 in 2010. It is worth mentioning in particular that – unlike in the case of per-capita income – there is an increasing tendency towards global equality, i.e. average life expectancy is rising much more quickly in countries outside the OECD than in OECD member states.

The global increase in life expectancy can be traced back to other far-reaching improvements in the area of health. First, among these is the decline in infant and child mortality (see Figure 2). Between 1968 and 2010, the global infant mortality rate (deaths of children in the first year of life per 1,000 live births) fell by more than half from 102 to 41, whilst over the same period the child mortality rate (deaths of children in the first five years of

life per 1,000 live births) dropped even further from 151 to 58. The global rate of maternal mortality (expressed per 100,000 live births) has also halved, falling from 400 in 1990 to 210 in 2010. Finally, improvements made in the area of drinking water provision have also been of enormous significance. In 1990 only 76% of the global population had access to an “improved water source”, whereas 20 years later this had already increased to 88%.² In absolute terms, this means that more than two billion people have gained access to improved sources of drinking water.

c) Education: literacy rates greatly improved

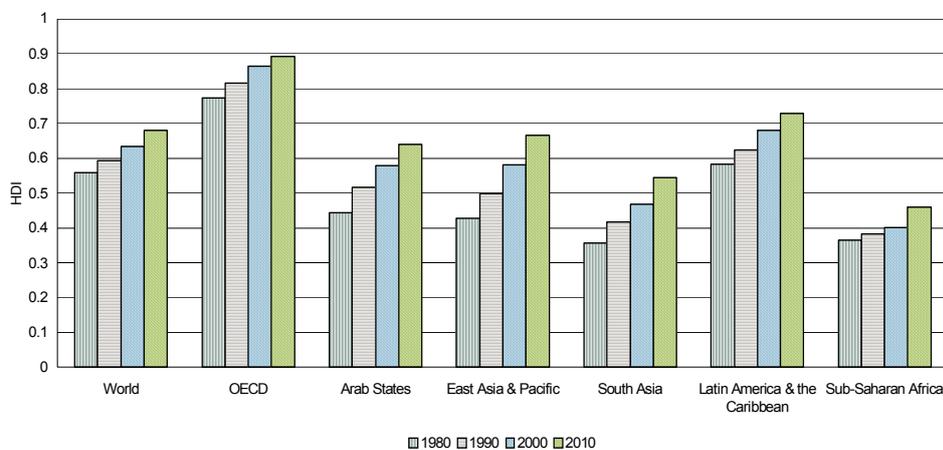
Equally strong progress can be reported in the education domain (Kenny 2011; World Bank 2012). Over the period from 1870 to 1950 the global literacy rate rose from 25% to 50%, and

then climbed further to reach 76% in 1990 and 84% in 2009. Here, too, increasing global convergence is evident. One of the driving factors behind this progress has been the continuous improvement seen in the primary school enrolment rate. In 1870 the global enrolment rate was only around 12%; by 1950 it had already reached 47%, and by 2009 it had climbed as high as 90%. However, as is often the case, Sub-Saharan Africa still performs worst. But even here the average enrolment rate has improved from 58% in 1999 to 76% in 2010. Furthermore, as enrolment rates increase so too do the average number of years spent in education. Whereas on a global average basis adults had spent just 2 years at school in 1900, over the following decades the time spent in education doubled to reach 4 years in 1960 and then doubled again to 8 years in 2009.

d) Human development: increasing global convergence

The achievements described above are reflected in the improvement recorded in the Human Development Index (HDI) (see Figure 3)³. At the global level, HDI increased from 0.56 in 1980 to 0.68 in 2010. Although this improvement can be attributed in no small part to the successes achieved in the most populous nations (China and India), continuous progress has been noted in all parts of the world since 1980 – with global convergence increasing at the same time. The greatest progress has been in East Asia and the Pacific region, followed by South Asia and the Arab states. Today, no less than 132 out of the total of 135 countries covered by the

Figure 3: Human Development Index (HDI), 1980-2010

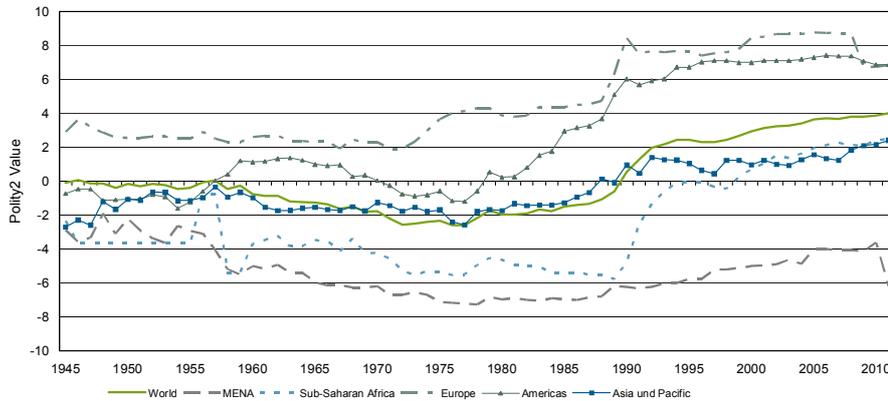


Data source: UNDP 2012

² Secure access to piped supplies is considered the primary source for improved drinking water. Other improved drinking water sources include public taps or standpipes, tube wells or boreholes, protected dug wells, protected springs and rainwater collection.

³ The Human Development Index (HDI) is published annually in the UNDP Human Development Report. It considers not only a country's Gross National Income (GNI) per capita (PPP US\$) but also life expectancy at birth and the level of education (measured by mean years of schooling and expected years of schooling).

Figure 4: Level of democracy, 1945-2011



Data source: Polity IV Project (2011)

HDI now have a higher human development score than in 1970. The only exceptions in this respect are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

From an overall perspective, therefore, the success achieved in socio-economic development ought not to be dismissed out of hand, although of course we should not lose sight of the unresolved problems that remain. Firstly, when progress has been made in quantitative terms, there is always the issue of quality. For example, in the area of education, rising enrolment rates and an increased number of years spent in school do not of themselves permit any conclusions to be drawn regarding the quality of the education received. Similarly, quantitative improvements in drinking water supply may still conceal problems in the quality of the water or service provided. Moreover, there is substantially less progress to report with regard to other socio-economic indicators (e.g. hunger, employment, sanitation, and income inequality).

Peace and democracy

Overall, the world today is a far more democratic and peaceful place than it was 50, 100 or 200 years ago.

a) The advance of democracy

The movement towards greater democracy is illustrated by trends in the “Polity Index” – the most widely used index of democracy⁴. This index measures the extent of democracy on a scale from -10 (perfect autocracy) to +10 (perfect democracy). It considers the competitiveness and regulation of political participation, the competitiveness and openness of executive recruitment, and constraints on the chief executive. The global

average Polity score in 1820 was just -6.7, but by 1945 it had climbed to -0.1. In the decades that followed, the global level of democracy initially dropped back, falling to -2.6 in 1977; but then it increased again, reaching 0.5 in 1990 and 4.0 in 2011 (see Figure 4). This trend towards democratisation covered every region in the world, especially after 1990. Least progress was seen in North Africa and the Near and Middle East; most progress was recorded in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the average Polity score improved from -4.8 to 2.5 between 1990 and 2011. Since 1977 the worldwide total of coherent democracies (scoring between +6 and +10 on the Polity scale) has risen from 34 to 95, whereas the number of coherent autocracies (-6 to -10) has fallen from 88 to 20.

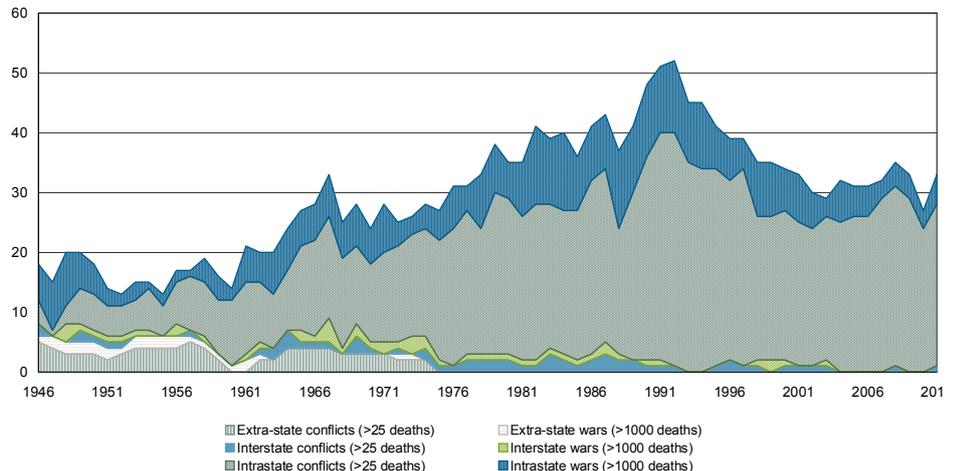
The Polity Index is not without controversy. It paints only a limited picture with regard to the granting of political rights, and it does not plot the protection of fundamental civil liberties at all. But in these areas, too, there has been

clear evidence of global progress. This is shown in the “Freedom House Index”, which assesses countries in terms of civil liberties and political rights on a scale of 1 to 7 (with 1 representing the best rating and 7 the worst)⁵. Over the period from 1972 to 2011, global average scores for civil liberties and political freedom improved from 4.2 to 3.3 and from 4.5 to 3.4 respectively. Here too there were improvements on average in every region of the world (with the lowest again being in North Africa and the Near/ Middle East). Overall, the percentage of countries rated as “free” (scoring between 1 and 2.5 on the Freedom House scale) has increased from 29% to 45% since 1972, whilst the proportion of “not free” countries (scoring between 5.5 and 7.0) has fallen from 46% to 24%.

b) Reduction in homicides

Furthermore, levels of violence across the world have fallen. This is apparent in the first instance in individual forms of violence. In 2010 the global average homicide rate was 6.9 per 100,000 population (UNODC 2011). The highest average homicide rates were in Africa (17.4) and the Americas (15.6), whereas the rates for Europe (3.5) and Asia (3.1) were significantly lower. Since 1995 average homicide rates have fallen in every region of the world, with the exception of Central America and the Caribbean. This downward trend in homicide becomes particularly apparent when we consult comparative historical data for Western Europe and North America (Pinker 2011). Average homicide rates here in the fourteenth or sixteenth century were as high as 100 per 100,000 population.

Figure 5: State-based armed conflicts, 1946-2011



Data source: UCDP/PRIO (2012)

⁴ For a comprehensive presentation on the Polity IV democracy index, see <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>.

⁵ For further information on the Freedom House Index see <http://www.freedomhouse.org/>.

c) Fewer armed conflicts

Collective violence has also reduced. Figure 5 shows that the global number of state-based armed conflicts rose at first from 18 in 1946 to 52 in 1992, but then fell back again to 27 by 2010.⁶ Whilst extra-state (i.e. colonial) conflicts died out in the 1970s, the number of interstate conflicts initially remained at a low level and then virtually disappeared from the picture in the 2000s. In contrast, from 1960 onwards there was a rapid increase in the number of internal conflicts, which only started to abate with the end of the Cold War. It is worth mentioning in particular that the global average number of battle-related deaths per 100,000 population has fallen substantially over time. This figure was as high as 250 during the First World War and reached 300 during the Second World War; subsequently it fell to less than 10 in the early 1970s, then dropped further to 0.5 in the 2000s. In absolute terms, the worldwide total of battle-related deaths came down from approx. 500,000 per year in the late 1940s to approx. 30,000 per year in the 2000s – a reduction of over 90%. In 1950 an armed conflict would still kill an average of 33,000 people, whereas in 2007 this was less than 1,000.

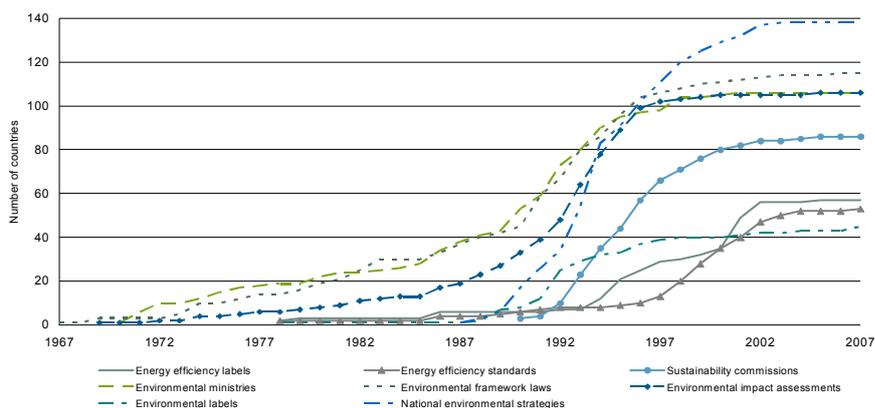
Other forms of collective violence are also steadily reducing. For example, the average number of people killed in acts of genocide fell from as high as 400 per 100,000 population during the Second World War to approx. 50 in the early 1970s, and then to almost zero in 2008 (Pinker 2011). The frequency of military coups around the world has also dropped significantly over time, declining from as many as 14 per year in the 1960s to 3 in 2010 (Powell and Thyne 2011).

Environment and climate change

a) Awareness significantly increased

A remarkable amount of capacity-building has taken place in the environmental area. This is evident firstly in the diffusion of environmental institutions and instruments around the globe (see Figure 6). For example, since the year 1970, environmental ministries have been established in well over a hundred countries. Furthermore, key development instruments such as environmental framework laws, environmental impact assessments and environmental labels have spread rapidly across the world. Secondly, in recent decades

Figure 6: Diffusion of environmental institutions and instruments, 1967-2007



Data source: Busch and Jörgens (unpublished)⁷

the number of environmental agreements has risen to well over 1,000. These include, among others, the international conventions on climate change, biodiversity, marine pollution, and desertification.

b) Strenuous efforts, but only mixed results

However, to date the beneficial impact on the state of the environment from this national and international environmental capacity-building has been no more than limited. This can be seen from a brief examination of selected environmental indicators (UN 2012). One of the few success stories here is that the level of substances which are harmful to the ozone layer has been reduced by 98% since 1986. On the other hand, between 1990 and 2000 CO2 emissions increased globally by 39%, with a particularly sharp rise recorded after 2002. The 2 °C global warming target is therefore virtually unachievable. Furthermore, the rate of forest loss has only been slowed, reducing from minus 8.3 million hectares per year in the 1990s to minus 5.2 million hectares per year in the 2000s. Hence the gains from afforestation in Asia only partially compensate for the continued high rate of forest loss in sub-Saharan Africa and South America. With regard to the preservation of biodiversity, on the one hand the number and the total size of protected areas have increased globally since 1990 by 58% and 48% respectively. On the other hand, however, the level of species loss among birds, mammals and amphibians remains high, and is only falling slightly. The over-exploitation of fish stocks is particularly dramatic: in 1974 'only' 10% of global fish stocks were being over-exploited, whereas by 2008 the level had already reached 32%.

c) Adverse long-term influence on human development

Ultimately, this progressive destruction of natural resources also calls into question the success achieved in other areas of development. This is shown by simulations prepared for the 2011 Human Development Report (UNDP 2011). The 'environmental challenge' scenario takes into account the negative effects of climate change on agricultural production and on access to clean drinking water and basic sanitation facilities. According to this scenario, the global average HDI in 2050 will be 8% lower than in the baseline scenario. Even gloomier are the predictions in the 'environmental disaster' scenario, which assumes uncontrolled logging, soil degradation, dramatic loss of biodiversity and an increase in extreme weather events. According to this scenario the global HDI would fall by as much as 15% by the year 2050, with the poorest countries being particularly badly affected.

Conclusion: Substantial progress achieved in socio-economic and political areas, but major risks remain in the environmental domain

There is no question that the level of global development continues to give cause for concern. Yet, over the course of recent decades, substantial progress has been made in incomes, health, education, and peace and democracy.

The good news is that the development successes described above have been achieved at a price which is comparatively low in historical terms (Kenny 2011). This applies in particular to the health and education area:

⁶ In the UCDP/PRIODAT dataset, a state-based armed conflict is defined as a 'contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year'. If more than 1,000 people lose their lives, the conflict is considered a war. A further distinction is made between conflicts/ wars which are extra-state (between a state and a non-state group outside its own territory), inter-state (between two governments), and internal (between a government and a non-governmental party).

⁷ The author would like to thank Per-Olof Busch (Universität Potsdam) und Helge Jörgens (Freie Universität Berlin) for the permission to use these still unpublished data. 4

health and education had long been tied to a high level of income, but recently even the poorest countries have made considerable progress in these sectors. The main reason for this is undoubtedly the development and global distribution of low-cost innovations and instruments (vaccines, oral rehydration therapy, conditional cash transfers, etc.).

The bad news is that inadequate progress to date in the environmental domain threatens existing and future development achievements alike. The current discussion around the post-2015 development agenda and the formulation of global sustainability goals offers a major opportunity to set the course for sustainable development success.

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