

Six Reasons for Optimism in 2020

“The 2010s have been the best decade ever. The evidence is overwhelming.”

Those are the words of Cato Institute senior fellow Johan Norberg, penned in an [op-ed](#) for the *Wall Street Journal*.

Norberg’s words seem hyperbolic at first glance, but he may be right. In many ways, the world is getting better every day, and at an explosive rate. This is contrary to mainstream sentiment, where pundits clamor about [democracy falling apart](#), climate catastrophe [threatening our very existence](#), and [capitalism failing us](#).

Yet, the proof is in the pudding, as they say. Data show the past decade has been a story of human flourishing and progress. Here are 6 facts about human progress that give us reason to be optimistic heading into 2020:

1. Extreme Poverty Is Plummeting

Extreme poverty rates – defined as living on less than \$1.90 per day – are [falling and continue to fall](#). From 1990 to 2015, the global extreme poverty rate fell from 36 percent to 10 percent. In 2018, it fell to 8.6 percent. This means more than 137,000 people [escape extreme poverty](#) every day.



2. More Than Half the World Is Middle Class

This might not shock you at first, but consider that September 2018 was the [first time in human history](#) that more than 50

percent of the global population was considered middle class, which amounts to about 3.8 billion people. One huge benefit of this is the demand the middle class places on the global economy, resulting in more entrepreneurial opportunities and increased commerce.

To put this in perspective, only 1.8 billion were considered middle class in [2009](#). That's only 26 percent of the global population, meaning proportionally, the percentage of total global population considered middle class grew 92 percent from 2009 to 2018.

3. Global Life Expectancy Is Rising

As Norberg also states in his [WSJ column](#),

Global life expectancy increased by more than three years in the past 10 years, mostly thanks to prevention of childhood deaths. According to the U.N., the global mortality rate for children under 5 declined from 5.6% in 2008 to 3.9% in 2018. A longer perspective shows how far we've come. Since 1950, Chad has reduced the child mortality rate by 56%, and it's the worst-performing country in the world. South Korea reduced it by 98%.



4. Climate-Related Deaths Are Falling

Norberg also addresses the question, "Hasn't this all come at the cost of a despoiled environment?" "No," he says. "At a certain point developed countries start polluting less." To make the point, he cites the [falling rate of climate-related mortalities](#).

Death rates from air pollution declined by almost a fifth

world-wide and a quarter in China between 2007 and 2017, according to the online publication Our World in Data.

Annual deaths from climate-related disasters declined by one-third between 2000-09 and 2010-15, to 0.35 per 100,000 people, according to the International Database of Disasters—a 95% reduction since the 1960s. That's not because of fewer disasters, but better capabilities to deal with them.



5. Life Is Getting Better in the World's Poorest Countries

Data from the World Bank show [continued progress in the world's poorest countries](#), especially in the past two decades. Access to basic drinking water has increased, as has electricity, sanitation, and clean cooking fuel. Data also show decreasing rates of poverty and childhood mortality.

6. The Cost of Starting a Business Has Plummeted in Developing Economies

Burdensome and onerous regulations can prevent individuals from starting their own business, which is one of the best ways to alleviate poverty. Not only is it tricky for the entrepreneur to navigate around excessive red tape, it also ends up costing them more. Thankfully, the cost of starting a business has drastically declined, especially in developing economies. In low- and middle-income economies, the average [cost of starting a business](#) was 141.76 percent of income-per-capita in 2004. In 2019, it is now just 30.85 percent.




P.S. Here is an infographic Norberg shared on his Twitter account.

Just one month left of the best decade in history.
pic.twitter.com/XGg6mpLTNq

– Johan Norberg (@johanknorberg) [November 28, 2019](#)

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This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the
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