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Cheer Up! The World Is Better Off Than You Think.

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By [Nicholas Kristof](#)

Opinion Columnist

Enough with the doom and gloom! Our planet may be in better shape than you think.

Human beings have a cognitive bias toward bad news (keeping us alert and alive), and we journalists reflect that: We report on planes that crash, not planes that land. We highlight disasters, setbacks, threats and deaths, so 2022 has kept us busy.

But a constant gush of despairing news can be paralyzing. So here's my effort to remedy our cognitive biases. Until the pandemic, I wrote an annual column arguing that the previous year was the [best](#) in human history. I can't do that this year. But I can suggest that broadly speaking, much is going right and this may still be the best time ever to be alive.

Where 2022 excelled particularly was in [technological strides](#).

Solar power capacity around the world is [on track](#) to roughly triple over the next five years and overtake coal as the leading source of power globally. Technical improvements are constant — such as M.I.T. researchers' developing a way to [produce thin and flexible solar panels](#) that can turn almost any outdoor surface into a power source.

There are parallel breakthroughs in batteries. Batteries, boring? No! They're one of the most exciting frontiers of technology, making remarkable [advances](#) crucial to storing green power. Likewise, nuclear fusion as an energy source marked [a milestone](#) in 2022. Green hydrogen is also [gaining ground](#) and could be useful for shipping and energy storage.

The upshot is that we are in the midst of a revolution of renewables that may soon leave us far better off. If things go right, we'll be able to enjoy cheaper, more reliable and more portable power than ever before. Truly cheap energy, whether from solar or fusion, could be transformational: For example, it could run desalination plants to provide the fresh water that we're running out of.

To be clear: Climate change remains an existential challenge. What's new is that if you squint a little, it is now possible to see a [path ahead](#) in which we manage — barely — to avoid calamity.

Health tech has likewise made immense gains. Scientists are making significant progress on vaccines for malaria, reflecting what may be a new [golden age](#) for vaccine development. [Immunotherapy](#) is making [progress against cancer](#) (among other feats, it is keeping one of my friends alive). A new gene editing technique may be able to cure sickle cell anemia; Bill Gates argues in his [annual letter](#) that the same approach may eventually offer a cure for H.I.V./AIDS as well.

We haven't even mentioned the progress in artificial intelligence, including [ChatGPT](#). (No, it did not write this column.)

And of course, technology is not taking leaps just in research labs but is filtering down to improve individual lives. I'm writing this on the family farm in Oregon with the help of our new Starlink internet service that is beginning to empower rural America (and has been a game-changer for Ukrainians as they humble their Russian invaders).

It's true that what may be the most important trend in my lifetime — historic progress against global poverty — has stalled because of Covid, climate change and the impact of the Ukraine war on global food prices. But it has not collapsed.

"The pandemic dip was not that bad on many outcomes," said Esther Duflo, an M.I.T. professor and the youngest person to have won a Nobel in economic science. "It was much less of a cataclysm for Africa than for us."

Indeed, World Bank researchers [estimate](#) that the number of people living in extreme poverty actually declined a hair in 2022, though the figure remains higher than on the eve of the pandemic. The number is about the same as it was [in 2018](#) — and much better than in 2017 and previous years.

Remarkably, preliminary estimates suggest that global child mortality [continued to fall](#) during the pandemic. A child is now about half as likely to die by age five as in the year 2000, and one-quarter as likely to die as in 1970.

I don't minimize the global [humanitarian crisis](#), and we must do better. Children around the world are suffering malnutrition that permanently impairs their faculties. Young girls are being married off. Displaced boys and girls are missing school.

But David Beasley, the executive director of the United Nations World Food Program, notes that while the world is facing "a perfect storm" of calamities, the world responded with an outpouring of assistance and an international push to allow exports of Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea. These measures have [held off](#) full-blown famine [at least for the time being](#).

"Quite frankly," he said, "it could have been so much worse."

You may have winced when I wrote above that "this may still be the best time ever to be alive." That's deeply contrary to the public gloom. But would we prefer to live at some other time when children were more likely to die?

Max Roser of the indispensable website [Our World in Data](#) puts the situation exactly right: "The world is awful. The world is much better. The world can be much better. All three statements are true at the same time."

So all the bad news is real, and I cover it the other 364 days of the year. But it's also important to acknowledge the gains that our brains (and we journalists) are often oblivious to — if only to remind ourselves that progress is possible when we put our shoulder to it. Onward!