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The forecast: yet another sunny day for the planet



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Illustration: Eric Lobbecke.

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Most people on the planet wake up each day thinking things are getting worse. It is little wonder, given what they routinely read in newspapers or see on television. But this gloomy mood is a problem because it feeds into scare stories about how climate change will end in Armageddon.

The fact is that the world is mostly getting better. For starters, average global life expectancy has more than doubled since 1900 and is now more than 70 years. Because the increase has been particularly marked among the poor, health inequality has declined massively. Moreover, the world is more literate, child labour is decreasing and we are living in one of the most peaceful times in history.

In addition, people are better off economically. During the past 30 years, average global per capita income has almost doubled, leading to widespread reductions in poverty. In 1990, almost four in 10 people were poor; today, that's less than one in 10. That has helped to transform the way people live. Between 1990 and 2015, for example, the proportion of the world's population

practising open defecation halved to 15 per cent. And in the same period, 2.6 billion people gained access to improved water sources, bringing the global share up to 91 per cent.

These changes also have improved the environment. Globally, the risk of death from air pollution — by far the biggest environmental killer — has declined substantially; in low-income countries, it has almost halved since 1990.

Finally, rich countries are increasingly preserving forests and reforestation, thanks to higher agricultural yields and changing attitudes to the environment.

Of course, many people may hear all of this and still remain convinced that climate change will wipe out the planet. That is understandable, but it says more about the influence of single-minded environmental activists and desperate media than it does about reality.

We are told that global warming will cause extreme weather and climate chaos that will put human survival at risk. But this view is not only unfounded; it also contradicts the findings of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

For example, hurricanes are constantly linked to global warming. But only three major hurricanes (that is, Category 3 or greater) have hit the continental US in the past 13 years — the lowest number since at least 1900. In its most recent assessment, the IPCC — using the term cyclone for hurricane — says there has been “no significant observed trends in global tropical cyclone frequency over the past century”. And NASA’s hurricane-modelling team has concluded “the historical Atlantic hurricane frequency record does not provide compelling evidence for a substantial greenhouse warming-induced long-term increase”.

Scientists say they think in time global warming will mean that hurricanes become less frequent but stronger. At the same time, prosperity is likely to increase dramatically during the coming decades, making us more resilient to such events. Once that is taken into account, the overall impact of hurricanes by 2100 will be lower than it is today.

Climate change is real and it is a problem. According to the IPCC, the overall impact of global warming by the 2070s will be equivalent to a 0.2 per cent to 2 per cent loss in average income. That’s not the end of the world but the same as a single economic recession in a world that is much better off than today.

The risk is that outsized fear will take us down the wrong path in tackling global warming. Concerned activists want the world to abandon fossil fuels as quickly as possible. But it will mean slowing the growth that has lifted billions out of poverty and transformed the planet. That has a real cost.

Rich, well-educated people in advanced economies often ignore or scoff at this cost. From the comfort of the World Economic Forum’s 2017 annual meeting in Davos, former US vice-president Al Gore tut-tutted about plans to build coal-fired power plants in Bangladesh. But Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina slapped that down, pointing out: “If you cannot develop the economic conditions of your people, then how will you save our people? We have to ensure the food security; we have to give them job opportunity.”

Indeed, analysis for the Copenhagen Consensus Centre shows that, even when accounting for global climate damage, developing coal power to drive economic growth in Bangladesh is an effective policy.

The cost would be \$9.7 billion, including the global, long-term climate costs of \$570 million, but the benefits would be greater than \$250bn — equivalent to more than an entire year of Bangladesh's gross domestic product.

On a global scale, our pathways are laid bare by work undertaken for the UN studying five global futures. It turns out that humanity will be much better off — including in Africa — in a scenario of high fossil fuel use than it would be even if we succeeded in achieving a benign low-CO2 world.

We need to solve climate change, but we also need to make sure the cure isn't more painful than the disease. A commensurate response would be to invest much more in researching and developing cheaper carbon-free energy sources that eventually can outcompete fossil fuels. That would ensure a smooth transition that doesn't slow economies down and hurt the worst-off in society.

Doom and gloom distort our world view and can lead to bad policies. The future is bright and we need smart decisions to keep it so.

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