

Best. Decade. Ever.

The first 10 years of the 21st century were humanity's finest -- even for the world's bottom billion.

CHARLES KENNY | FOREIGN POLICY MAGAZINE

The past 10 years have gotten a bad rap as the "Naughty Aughties" -- and deservedly so, it seems, for a decade that began with 9/11 and the Enron scandal and closed with the global financial crisis and the Haiti earthquake. In between, we witnessed the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, SARS and swine flu, not to mention vicious fighting in Sudan and Congo, Afghanistan and, oh yes, Iraq. Given that our brains seem hard-wired to remember singular tragedy over incremental success, it's a hard sell to convince anyone that the past 10 years are worthy of praise.

But these horrific events, though mortal and economic catastrophes for many millions, don't sum up the decade as experienced by most of the planet's 6-billion-plus people. For all its problems, the first 10 years of the 21st century were in fact humanity's finest, a time when more people lived better, longer, more peaceful, and more prosperous lives than ever before.

Consider that in 1990, roughly half the global population lived on less than \$1 a day; by 2007, the proportion had shrunk to 28 percent -- and it will be lower still by the close of 2010. That's because, though the financial crisis briefly stalled progress on income growth, it was just a hiccup in the decade's relentless GDP climb. Indeed, average worldwide incomes are at their highest levels ever, at roughly \$10,600 a year -- and have risen by as much as a quarter since 2000. Some 1.3 billion people now live on more than \$10 a day, suggesting the continued expansion of the global middle class. Even better news is that growth has been faster in poor places like sub-Saharan Africa than across the world as a whole.

There are still 1 billion people who go to bed each night desperately hungry, but cereal prices are now a fraction of what they were in the 1960s and 1970s. That, alongside continued income growth, is why the proportion of the developing world's population classified as "undernourished" fell from 34 percent in 1970 to 17 percent in 2008, even at the height of a global spike in food prices. Agricultural productivity, too, continues to climb: From 2000 to 2008, cereal yields increased at nearly twice the rate of population growth in the developing world. And though famine continues to threaten places such as Zimbabwe, hundreds of millions of people are eating more -- and better -- each day.

We're also winning the global battle against infectious disease. The 2009 swine flu has killed more than 18,000 people so far, according to the World Health Organization. But its impact has been far less severe than the apocalyptic

forecasts of a few years ago, fueled by nightmare scenarios of drug-resistant, Airbus-hopping viruses overwhelming a hot, flat, and crowded world. The truth is that pandemics are on the wane. Between 1999 and 2005, thanks to the spread of vaccinations, the number of children who died annually from measles dropped 60 percent. The proportion of the world's infants vaccinated against diphtheria, whooping cough, and tetanus has climbed from less than half to 82 percent between 1985 and 2008.

There are dark spots still, not least the continuing tragedy of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. But though the 15 countries with the highest HIV prevalence still see life expectancies more than three years lower than their 1990 peak, at least the trend has started ticking back up in the last **decade**. The overwhelming global picture is of better health: From 2000 to 2008, child mortality dropped more than 17 percent, and the average person added another two years to his or her life expectancy, now just one shy of the biblical standard of three score and 10.

We can thank improved literacy, which has played a role in spreading vital knowledge in low-income societies, for some of these health gains. More than four-fifths of the world's population can now read and write -- including more than two-thirds of Africans. The proportion of the world's young people who go on to university climbed from below one-fifth to above a quarter from 2000 to 2007 alone. And progress in education has been particularly rapid for women, one sign of growing gender equity. Although no one would argue the struggle is complete, the gains are striking -- the worldwide proportion of women parliamentarians, for instance, increased from 11 percent in 1997 to 19 percent in 2009.

Even the wars of the last 10 years, tragic as they have been, are minor compared with the violence and destruction of decades and centuries past. The number of armed conflicts -- and their death toll -- has continued to fall since the end of the Cold War. Worldwide, combat casualties fell 40 percent from 2000 to 2008. In sub-Saharan Africa, some 46,000 people died in battle in 2000. By 2008, that number had dropped to 6,000. Military expenditures as a percentage of global GDP are about half of their 1990 level. In Europe, so recently divided into two armed camps, annual military budgets fell from \$744 billion in 1988 to \$424 billion in 2009. The statistical record doesn't go back far enough for us to know with absolute certainty whether this was the most peaceful decade ever in terms of violent deaths per capita, but it certainly ranks as the lowest in the last 50 years.

On the other hand, humanity's malignant effect on the environment has accelerated the rate of extinction for plants and animals, which now reaches perhaps 50,000 species a year. But even here there was some good news. We reversed our first man-made global atmospheric crisis by banning chlorofluorocarbons -- by 2015, the Antarctic ozone hole will have shrunk by nearly 400,000 square miles. Stopping climate change has been a slower process.

Nonetheless, in 2008, the G-8 did commit to halving carbon emissions by 2050. And a range of technological advances -- from hydrogen fuel cells to compact fluorescent bulbs -- suggests that a low-carbon future need not require surrendering a high quality of life.

Technology has done more than improve energy efficiency. Today, there are more than 4 billion mobile-phone subscribers, compared with only 750 million at the decade's start. Cell phones are being used to provide financial services in the Philippines, monitor real-time commodity futures prices in Vietnam, and teach literacy in Niger. And streaming video means that fans can watch cricket even in benighted countries that don't broadcast it -- or upload citizen reports from security crackdowns in Tehran.

Perhaps technology also helps account for the striking disconnect between the reality of worldwide progress and the perception of global decline. We're more able than ever to witness the tragedy of millions of our fellow humans on television or online. And, rightly so, we're more outraged than ever that suffering continues in a world of such technological wonder and economic plenty.

Nonetheless, if you had to choose a decade in history in which to be alive, the first of the 21st century would undoubtedly be it. More people lived lives of greater freedom, security, longevity, and wealth than ever before. And now, billions of them can tweet the good news. Bring on the 'Teenies.