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## STATE OF MANKIND – REVISITING THE DATA

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In acknowledgement of, and building on, Steven Pinker's TED Talk:  
*Is the world getting better or worse?*

Frankfurt, May 25<sup>th</sup> 2023  
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Dr. Artus Ph. Rosenbusch

## FOREWORD (DR. ARTUS PH. ROSENBUSCH)

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*"THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHAT WE DO AND WHAT WE ARE CAPABLE OF DOING WOULD SUFFICE TO SOLVE MOST OF THE WORLD'S PROBLEMS." – MAHATMA GANDHI*

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When I first watched Steven Pinker's 2018 TED talk, "Is the world getting better or worse? A look at the numbers"<sup>1</sup>, I didn't realize the intensity with which I craved a glimmer of hope in contrast to the relentless, despair-inducing news cycle. Every day we are bombarded with the worst news possible. That's great for the newspapers, but not-so-great for our mental health. At the time, the constant barrage of negativity and tragedy left me feeling somewhat defeated about the state of humanity. Pinker's talk provided some much-needed reassurance that things weren't as dire as they appeared. It helped me keep my hope up about human progress and reminded me that assuming personal responsibility and ownership not only counteracts depression but also serves as an antidote to nihilism, paving a realistic path for genuine world transformation.

If you haven't watched it yet, I wholeheartedly recommend taking the time [to do so](#).

The talk instilled me with confidence about mankind's trajectory. I cherished this feeling. Especially when the pandemic struck, when we began reading about the effects of lockdowns for education, particularly in the poorest countries, and when war came back from different continents and from history books, to haunt us right here right now in the heart of Europe...

"Considering the bigger picture, mankind isn't doing so badly", I thought.  
If asked, I would say the same, and recommend Pinker as a credible source.

But then ... as my daily news consumption continued to challenge this reassuring belief, I felt compelled to re-examine those key performance indicators (KPIs).

Pinker had shown the trajectory of key metrics, globally, to be truly remarkable! The world, when viewed through numbers, appeared much more positive than I would have anticipated. But... how have these metrics developed since?

Does an impassionate look at the numbers still show humanity on a triumphant march of progress?

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<sup>1</sup> Pinker, S. (2018, April). *Is the world getting better or worse? A look at the numbers*. | TED Talk.  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/steven\\_pinker\\_is\\_the\\_world\\_getting\\_better\\_or\\_worse\\_a\\_look\\_at\\_the\\_numbers?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/steven_pinker_is_the_world_getting_better_or_worse_a_look_at_the_numbers?language=en)

## THE DATA

To answer in a single diagram (see Figure 1): mankind is still, by many key measures, doing fine.

If we just look at what arguably might be the top 4 indicators of human progress (less people in **Global Extreme Poverty**, more people receiving a **Basic Formal Education**, people having a bigger **Life Expectancy**, and reduced **Child Mortality** rates), we are doing awesome. We have continued building on the strong performance that the TED talk showcased in 2018.

But let us also talk about **Governance**, **Global Conflict** and **Climate Change**. The first two of these metrics were analyzed then, and the reality of these today is more mixed. In a centurial picture these too may look rosy, but in the here and now, we are seeing unfortunate declines. We added **Climate Change** as it seems to us the most pressing issue for humanity today, and the state of the world on that front is still incredibly scary. And yet, we will argue that we are at least on a somewhat positive trajectory there.

Note: We primarily did this research for ourselves. So yes, the color-coding system and the corresponding “hope levels” can be considered somewhat subjective. Still, we do believe that we base them on reliable data.

While Figure 1 gives an overview, the rest of the article gives a brief discussion for each metric with specific details outlining the progress that has been made.

In the words of Mark Twain, “The secret to making progress is to get started”, so let’s begin!

| Development Indicator  | Pinker’s TED talk   | Development since  | Hope Level |
|------------------------|---|--|------------|
| Global Extreme Poverty | 1820: 89%<br>2002: 26%<br>2018: 10%   | continued to drop<br>Today 8.5%  | 😍          |
| Basic Formal Education | 1820 17.2%<br>2015: 86%   | latest available data does not yet<br>show the full Covid effect<br>2020: 90%  | 😊          |
| Life Expectancy Global | 1960: 52.6y<br>2018: 70 years   | continued to improve<br>2022: 73.16 years  | 😍          |
| Child Mortality Rates  | 1950: 146 per 1k live births<br>2018: 29 per 1k live births                                     | continued to improve<br>2023: 26 per 1k live births  | 😄          |
| Governance             | 1900: 78.51% of world pop in closed<br>autocracies<br>2018: Pinker status 12.92%                | 2022: 16.85% of world pop in closed<br>autocracies   | 😓          |
| Global Conflict        | 2018: 12 ongoing wars, last great power<br>war being 65 years prior                             | Decline of global war has stalled and<br>ongoing wars are longer lasting   | 😐          |
| Climate Change         | In 2018 we were not on track to reach<br>the Paris targets; key agents were also<br>non-aligned | Today we are still not on track, but at<br>least key agents are aligned, and<br>humanity is (finally!) starting to take<br>radical action. | 🙏          |

FIGURE 1. DEVELOPMENT IN PINKER’S METRICS SINCE 2018 TED TALK

## 1. GLOBAL EXTREME POVERTY

... ROSE WITH COVID-19, BUT: WE ARE STILL BETTER THAN WE WERE IN 2018

According to the World Bank definition, **extreme poverty** refers to individuals who live on less than \$2.15 per person, per day (last updated in September 2022, expressed in 2017 Purchasing Power Parity prices)<sup>2</sup>. Looking back to 1820, a staggering 89.15% of the world's population was living in extreme poverty. However, when we fast-forward to 2002, we see a substantial reduction, with the number falling to 25.65%. At the time of the talk, global extreme poverty had further declined to 10%. Today, this percentage is less than 8.5%. For an example of extreme progress, the East Asia and Pacific region has witnessed a significant decrease in extreme poverty. In 1990, a startling 53% of the population lived in extreme poverty, but by 2022, this percentage has dropped to a mere 4%<sup>3</sup>. The global share of people in extreme poverty saw a hopeful and improving trend between 1990 and 2019 – despite being interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Despite the hardships brought on by the pandemic, the progress achieved over a span of two centuries and in recent years can only be seen as a phenomenal success.

## 2. BASIC FORMAL EDUCATION

... HAS CONTINUED TO REACH AN INCREASING MAJORITY OF MANKIND  
– A FEW COUNTRIES CONTINUE TO LAG BEHIND

**Education** is a fundamental resource and pillar of human development. Growth in global literacy has seen increasing rates, and much progress has been made in recent years. Looking back to 1820, only 17.20% of the world's population aged 15 or older had some formal basic education, while a staggering 82.80% lacked any formal education. Fast forward to 2015, and the share of the population with at least some formal basic education had risen to 86%, with just 14% lacking any formal education. As of 2020, around 90% of the world's population has completed primary education, and 66% have attained a secondary education<sup>4</sup>.

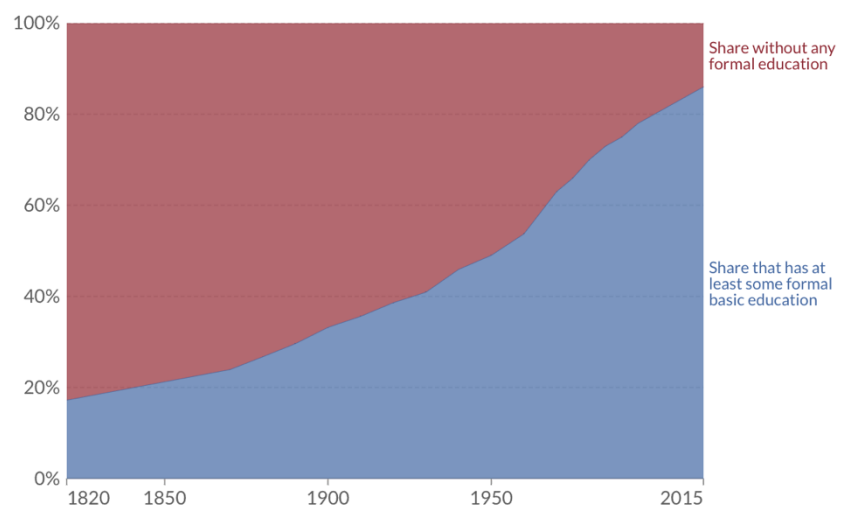


FIGURE 2. SHARE OF WORLD POPULATION OLDER THAN 15 YEARS WITH AT LEAST BASIC EDUCATION

Despite the worldwide improvements in education there are still countries with literacy rates below 50%, highlighting the need for continued efforts in ensuring quality education for all, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographic location. As a specific negative example, Afghanistan immediately comes to my mind, being the only country in the world that formally excludes girls and women from education. While this is undeniably abhorrent, the words “the only” in the preceding sentence once again carries hope for humanity at large.

<sup>2</sup> Poverty Overview. World Bank. (2022, November 30). <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>

<sup>3</sup> Christensen, Z. (2023, February). *Economic poverty trends: Global, regional and national*. Development Initiatives. <https://devinit.org/resources/poverty-trends-global-regional-and-national/>

<sup>4</sup> Topic: Education Worldwide. Statista. (2022, October 11). <https://www.statista.com/topics/7785/education-worldwide/#topicOverview>

Figure 2: Roser, M., & Ortiz-Ospina, E. (2016, August 31). *Global Education*. Our World in Data. <https://ourworldindata.org/global-education>

### 3. LIFE EXPECTANCY

... CONTINUES TO GROW GLOBALLY, DESPITE TAKING A SLIGHT DENT IN RICH COUNTRIES

Looking at the improvement in life expectancy shines a positive light onto the progress of healthcare and medicine over the years. Back in 1960, the average life expectancy in the world was just 52.58 years. In 2020 the global average life expectancy had risen to 72.75 years - a significant increase. Today, the average life expectancy for individuals worldwide stands at 73.16 years, more than doubling from the global average since 1900. The COVID-19 pandemic caused life expectancy in high-income countries including Russia, Bulgaria, and The United States to decrease from 80.98 years in 2019 to 80.31 years in 2020, but the overall trend still reflects upward progress<sup>5</sup>. While there are still significant disparities in life expectancy across different countries and regions, these figures show that continued efforts in enhancing the quality and access of healthcare will lead to further improvements in life expectancy around the world.

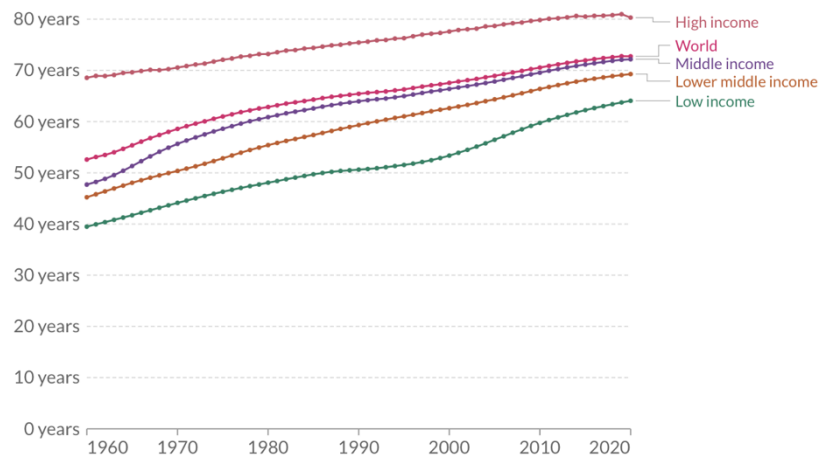


FIGURE 3. LIFE EXPECTANCY 1960-2020

### 4. CHILD MORTALITY

... WHILE CHALLENGES PERSIST IN IMPOVERISHED NATIONS, WE SEE CONTINUED GLOBAL IMPROVEMENT IN CHILD SURVIVAL RATES SINCE PINKER'S TALK

As a father of a very small child, looking at global child survival rates felt especially grim to Artus. We were struck by the sobering reality of the challenges we face in ensuring the health and well-being of our children. But we also found some encouraging statistics, as there is much reassurance to be taken from the data.



FIGURE 4. WORLD INFANT MORTALITY RATE 1950-2023 WITH U.N. PROJECTIONS

In each recent decade, there has been significant progress in global child survival. When narrowing it down to infant mortality, rates plummeted from 146 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1950, to 29 at the time of Pinker's analysis, and further to 26 in 2023<sup>6</sup>.

This progress is heartening!

It is unfortunately also true that millions of children still die each year due to preventable causes such as malnutrition, poor sanitation, and lack of healthcare access<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Life expectancy decreased in most high-income countries. Max-Planck-Gesellschaft. (2021, November 4). <https://www.mpg.de/17790299/1102-defo-life-expectancy-decreased-in-most-high-income-countries-154642-x>

Figure 3: Roser, M., Ortiz-Ospina, E., & Ritchie, H. (2022, June 2). *Life expectancy*. Our World in Data. <https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy>

<sup>6</sup> World infant mortality rate 1950-2023. MacroTrends. (n.d.-b). <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/WLD/world/infant-mortality-rate>

<sup>7</sup> Child Mortality. UNICEF DATA. (2023, April 25). <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-survival/under-five-mortality/>

Figure 4: World infant mortality rate 1950-2023. MacroTrends. (n.d.-b). <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/WLD/world/infant-mortality-rate>



Given the numbers however, we must not feel helpless. Progress has been happening and it continues to happen. Let us continue to highlight the urgent need for action, for constant efforts for improvement, and for consistently building on these progressive results!

## 5. GOVERNANCE

... AUTOCRACIES, UNFORTUNATELY, SEEM TO BE MAKING A COMEBACK

Over the past two centuries, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of democracies in the world. Today, approximately half of the world's nations are currently autocratic or democratic. While the "Regimes of the World" dataset focuses on four types of political systems.

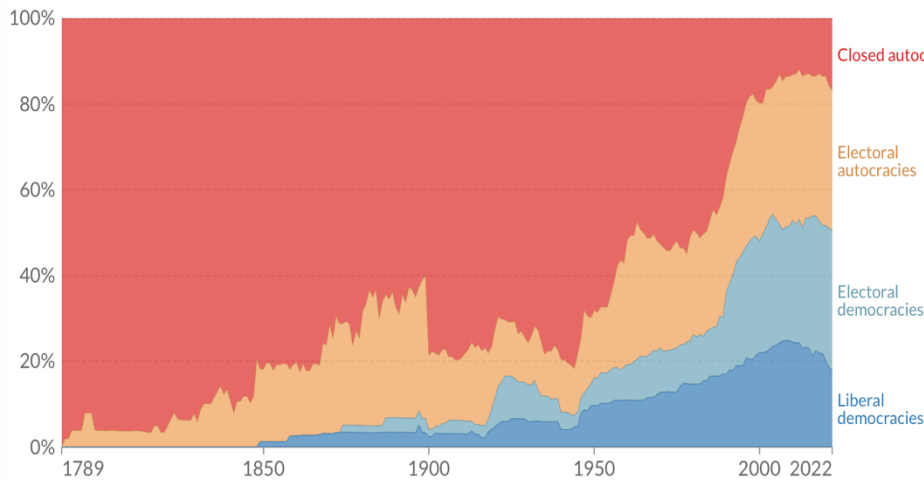


FIGURE 5. SHARE OF THE WORLD LIVING IN DEMOCRACIES AND AUTOCRACIES

Let us focus on "Closed Autocracies" and "Electoral Democracies" to highlight the substantial shift in progress toward people being able to elect their leaders.

In 1900, 78.51% of the world population was under autocratic rule, while only 1.65% was democratic. However, as of 2022, 16.85% of people are governed by closed autocracies, while a full 17.98% are governed by liberal democracies. The decline in autocratic regimes came with a wide adoption of democratic political systems, where the power of individuals has gained strength.

Back in 2018, however, things looked even better, with only 12.92% of the world's populace governed by closed autocracies. That this number has gone back up since then is both alarming and concerning. Right now, we see a growing influence of authoritarian rule across the globe. This development raises questions about the progress of not only the state of democracy, but also human rights and the future of governance.

In a recent analysis The Economist showed autocracies to be strongly connected with globalization – making it complicated and costly to split the two<sup>8</sup>. Regarding innovation and investment, autocracies are strong rivals for democratic countries, accounting for over 30% of global GDP in 2022. Another line, also from the Economist, gave me pause. With developing countries increasingly inclined to forge partnerships with nations like China<sup>9</sup>, ruling elites are quoted to say:

*"China offers more stability, more infrastructure development, and fewer lectures".*

<sup>8</sup> The Economist Newspaper. (2022, March 19). *Globalisation and autocracy are locked together. for how much longer?*. The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2022/03/19/globalisation-and-autocracy-are-locked-together-for-how-much-longer>

<sup>9</sup> The Economist Newspaper. (2023b, May 16). *Can the west win over the rest of the world?*. The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2023/05/16/can-the-west-win-over-the-rest-of-the-world>

When income inequality, unemployment, shifts in cultural values, in personal, religious, and political priorities drive today's populism<sup>10</sup>, we must remember that protection of freedom needs constant attention, and it is unfortunately all but guaranteed.

Reflecting on the battles our ancestors fought, we continue to confront similar challenges. It is clearly insufficient to rest on the laurels of previous generations on this matter. If we value preserving liberty, we must remain consistent in our efforts to fight for it, over, and over again. We have better technology today, an abundance of role models, and easily accessible knowledge at our fingertips. More importantly, when we can look back at the developments of past centuries and decades, we can remember this: change is possible, and your voice does matter!

Looking back at Figure 5 and the development of the numbers across the last 5 years, we wonder how much of the effect is driven by

- liberal countries regressing into autocratic regimes, and
- comparatively higher birth rates in some autocracies vs. those in liberal democracies.

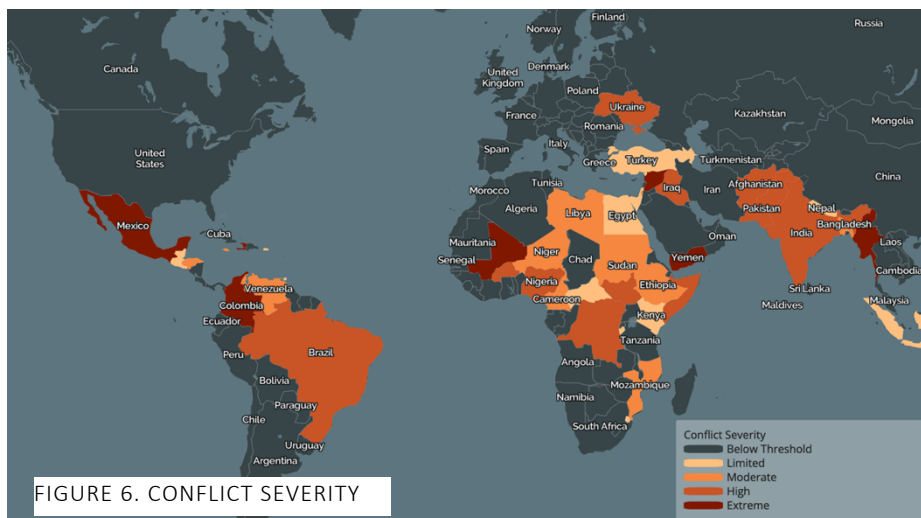
Regrettably we have not found this data, nor the time to run the numbers ourselves.

So, if you know more than we do here – please do reach out and share your insight!

## 6. CONFLICT

... WARS ARE LONGER LASTING, MORE PRONOUNCED AGAIN, AND OFTEN FUELED BY CLIMATE CHANGE

In the TED talk, a notable finding from the gathered research was the comparison between the global conflict rate in 2018 and the corresponding figure from three decades ago. In 2018, there were 12 ongoing conflicts, while 30 years before there were 23. Although there has been a decline in the number of war deaths since 1946, the prevalence of conflict and violence currently is on the rise globally, mainly between political militias, criminal organizations, and international terrorist groups<sup>11</sup>. Unfortunately, decreasing global war numbers have stalled and ongoing conflicts have become increasingly prolonged and more deadly again.



One of the driving factors behind this is, maybe surprisingly, **Climate Change**. Nearly all current conflicts (with the single exception of Russian aggression in Ukraine) occur in impoverished and arid regions. They are fueled by droughts, famine, and natural catastrophes. When people are displaced due to unlivable conditions of their land, they are often forced to move onto land that belongs to other ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Aiginger, K. (2020, January 1). *Populism: Root causes, power grabbing and counter strategy*. Intereconomics. <https://www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2020/number/1/article/populism-root-causes-power-grabbing-and-counter-strategy.html#:~:text=people%20at%20home,-Four%20root%20causes%20of%20populism,higher%20welfare%2C%20globally%20and%20locally.>

<sup>11</sup> United Nations. (n.d.). *A New Era of Conflict and Violence*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/un75/new-era-conflict-and-violence>

<sup>12</sup> The Economist Newspaper. (2023, April 19). *In Sudan and beyond, the trend towards global peace has been reversed*. The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/04/19/in-sudan-and-beyond-the-trend-towards-global-peace-has-been-reversed>

For example, approximately 70 conflicts<sup>13</sup> were counted in the region of Mali in Western Africa, mainly concerning land and grazing rights.

It is crucial to acknowledge the complex set of factors that contribute to global conflict as its impact crosses into numerous nations, affecting political stability, economies, and human lives.

To find a silver lining: While **Global Conflict** does look much worse today than it did in 2018, the world today is still more peaceful than it was in the 1980s.

## 7. CLIMATE CHANGE

... IS STILL A MAJOR ISSUE, BUT AT LEAST, FINALLY...

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Climate change is a complex and multifaceted issue. Artus has dedicated a significant portion of his professional career to fighting it, and he finds it difficult to navigate between two contrasting emotions – feeling immense frustration witnessing the world consistently falling short of scientifically supported targets for reducing emissions, and the sliver of hope that continues to grow within me, when we see that ultimately even China and the USA (traditionally two of the most challenging contributors among the big economies) finally make big strides.

At least the debate of *whether* we need to take climate action has finally concluded.

Ignoring a few loud-mouthed dinosaurs with vested interests, mankind is finally channeling its resources, creative potential, and dedication towards tackling this age-defining issue. We have gained substantial knowledge on how to decarbonize the electric grid. Renewable kilowatt-hours are the most cost-effective across majority of the globe<sup>14</sup>. However, we are still struggling with mobility, and even more with the heating sector. The journey demands so much time, effort, and resistance. Moreover, we haven't even *really* started ensuring that the sourcing of base materials used in renewable generation and batteries are in accordance with the HSE standards that we would hope for. Still, considering where the world was in 2018 – deeply in a state of denial and protectionism – and comparing to where we stand now, after COP27, the passing of the Inflation Reduction Act in the USA, and China's addition of nearly 85 GW of solar capacity in 2022, I would give mankind's progress a yellow traffic light. This represents a significant shift from the dark orange of a few years ago. Yes, there is still much to do, but we increasingly have comprehensive plans in place, and we have finally begun to take action. We also feel somewhat inspired knowing that numerous brilliant minds that we have had the pleasure of working with across the globe are actively pushing to solve these exact problems.

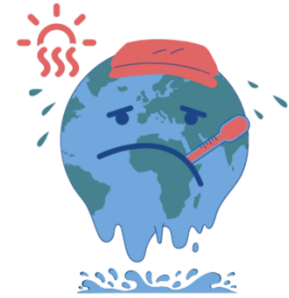


FIGURE 7. SAD GLOBE

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<sup>13</sup> That is, obviously, by different institutions and using a different and more granular way of counting than the beforementioned with only a 12 conflicts globally.

<sup>14</sup> LCOE, the lifetime cost of electricity, considers investment, financing, and operating costs, while accounting for the time-value of money & goods. Coal, ignite, and gas plants have LCOE values of around 16, 12, and 10 cents per kWh, while solar PV typically ranges from 2-5 cents.

For large installations in sun-rich countries, below 2 cents are standard.

More information found at [ise.fraunhofer.de](https://ise.fraunhofer.de)



## SUMMARY (DR. ARTUS PH. ROSENBUSCH)

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While Pinker's talk provided a positive perspective, and the research that we are sharing in this document has also brought me hope, there is still a lot of work to be done.

We must channel the hope we find towards combatting nihilism and defeatism and taking responsibility.

We must continue our efforts towards progress, while also realizing that we are both the problem *and* the solution. It is important to acknowledge that the information presented may not be perfect, and there may be indicators that have been missed, but the point is to make myself and you, dear reader, acknowledge the fact that many key performance numbers have continued to get better over time, the same way that I felt better after first watching Pinker's TED talk.

Dan Milman's character Socrates says:

*"The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new."*

In other words, we can't change the past, but we can work towards our future. When tomorrow's news feed shows us, again, how much needs to be done, we must remember that these headlines only exist because they stray away from the norm, as humanity **can** and **will** overcome this.

Let's take this as a booster to work towards progress and strive for a better future for all.



THERE IS WORK TO DO...

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Dr. Artus Ph. Rosenbusch, is a father, an entrepreneur, a trainer and coach based in Frankfurt, Germany**

Based on an extensive career in international Management Consulting he predominantly teaches those skills that have made him, his teams and his employees successful in the market place. He supports teams and leaders in their efforts to increase their performance, reach ambitious goals and meet the challenges of tomorrow.

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