

hanging-by-your-fingernails subsistence with your children uneducated and dying—that will go from typical to essentially nonexistent just in the course of my adult life.

That's because of a huge global investment in vaccines, medicines, schooling, sanitation, and technology.

In 1990, more than 12 million children died before the age of 5. Now that figure is down to about 6 million. Microsoft founder Bill Gates, whose foundation is pioneering the vaccines and medicines saving these lives, says that in his lifetime the number will drop below 1 million.

"There's been this change of consciousness and a massive mobilization of resources," says Stephen Morrison, director of the Global Health Policy Center in Washington. "It's had an enormous effect."

Diseases Dying Out

Ancient diseases like polio and measles are on the way out thanks to massive vaccination programs. Guinea worm is a tropical disease in which a worm moves through the body under the skin and causes intense pain and lifelong disabilities. It's on the verge of being eradicated thanks to improved sanitation and effective drug treatments. Malaria has been brought under control in many countries, and a vaccine may reduce its toll even further.

AIDS is also receding. Last year in southern Africa, I interviewed coffin-makers who told me grumpily that business is bad because AIDS is no longer killing large numbers of people. That's because AIDS drugs are widely available and effective at managing the disease.

But when additional kids survive in poor countries, does that really matter? Isn't the result just a population explosion that eventually leads to famine or war, and more deaths later on?

That's a frequent interpretation, but it's wrong. When child mortality drops and families know that their children will survive, they are more likely to have fewer babies—and to invest more in the ones they do have. In other words, declining

Over the last few decades,
the world has gotten healthier
and better educated.

Then & Now

Cases of polio worldwide

1988	2012
350,000	123
in 120 countries	in 3 countries

People taking AIDS drugs in developing countries

2000	2012
200,000	9.7 million
less than	

Global literacy rate

1990	2013
76%	84%

Percentage of the population in developing nations with no schooling (15 and older)

1950	2010
61%	17%

SOURCES: UNESCO, NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH, UNAIDS, WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, THE WORLD FACTBOOK (C.I.A.), AND THE GLOBAL HEALTH POLICY CENTER.

The goal is to end extreme poverty by 2030—and we're close.

child deaths leads to declining births. Bangladesh, for example, is now down to an average of 2.2 births per woman, below the world average of 2.5 births per woman and close to the U.S. average of 2.

The drop in mortality understates the gains, because diseases don't just kill people but also leave them disabled or unproductive, and that wrecks a country's

A garbage dump in Cambodia that's home to 2,000 people



economy. Poor people used to go blind routinely from disease or were unable to work for want of reading glasses. Now they are much less likely to go blind, and far more likely to get glasses. That translates into more economic productivity.

So does better education. All over the world, illiteracy is retreating and technology is spreading. More people now have cellphones than toilets.

Rising China & India

These achievements aren't just the result of work by Western donors or aid groups. Some of the biggest gains have come from economic growth in China and India. When the poor are able to get jobs, they forge their own path out of poverty.

Rajiv Shah, head of the U.S. Agency for International Development, which is responsible for all U.S. foreign aid, is optimistic that extreme poverty will be eliminated by 2030. But he notes that the focus will have to be on lagging countries. Aid groups are everywhere in places like Rwanda or Malawi, which are at peace and have functioning governments that welcome them. But they are scarce in areas like eastern Congo, which has been a war zone for decades, or the Nuba Mountains of Sudan, where a war is raging largely out of sight and aid groups have been denied access.

Despite the gains, a Pew poll recently found that the budget area that Americans most want to cut is "aid to the world's needy." Perhaps one reason is that aid groups and journalists alike are so focused on the problems abroad that we leave the public mistakenly believing that the war on poverty and disease is being lost.

So let's acknowledge that there's plenty of work remaining and that poverty in America—where 15 percent still live below the poverty line*—must be a top priority. But let's also celebrate a triumph for humanity. The world of extreme poverty and disease that characterized life for most people throughout history may now finally be on its way out. •

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*\$23,550 for a family of four