

Things aren't as bad as they seem, and you can help fix them | Column

From COVID to climate change, we can move from hopelessness to promise by pushing ourselves, and our leaders, to implement workable, humane approaches.



United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres addresses the U.N. General Assembly. [EDUARDO MUNOZ | AP]

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United Nations secretary-general Antonio Guterres began his second five-year term in January with a speech filled with political despair. He stated that the world today is worse than it was five years ago, not just due to the pandemic but also a result of climate change, economic inequality and ongoing geopolitical tensions around the world. Guterres' comments reinforced the march of negative news inundating us so far in 2022.

However, this negative "report card" should not leave us with political despair. There are pathways forward and clear directions for addressing the world's most pressing problems. We can move from hopelessness to promise by pushing ourselves, and our leaders, to implement these humane approaches.

For example, two areas of immediate concern to the secretary-general are the lack of vaccinations in large parts of the world, especially in Africa, and the critical need to reduce carbon emissions by 45 percent in this decade to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit).

Fortunately, there are clear corridors forward in both these areas which provide direction and hope.

Lack of vaccines: Guterres correctly identifies the morally inequitable distribution of the more than 10 billion vaccinations that have been distributed so far world-wide. *The New York Times* reports that 77 percent of people in the wealthiest countries have received at least one dose, while in low-income countries the figure is less than 10 percent. Low rates of vaccination are a particular concern in Africa. The good news is that over 1 billion vaccine doses should arrive in Africa by March, in theory enough to vaccinate 70 percent of the continent's population. While logistical challenges and anti-vaccine movements hinder progress, the direction forward seems brighter. Center for Global Development fellow Charles Kenny writes: "Vaccines against new variants will be distributed more rapidly, and the next pandemic should see the unconscionable gap between high- and low-income countries close much faster." Recent scientific studies of the research into mRNA and DNA vaccines are also revealing promising potential uses to treat cancers and chronic diseases like HIV. In addition, in 2022 we will also realize the distribution of the world's first vaccine for malaria which, Kenny notes "killed an estimated 627,000 people in 2020." There is thus no need for despair in regards to global health. Vaccine development and distribution has created a very hopeful future for millions.

Reducing emissions: Israeli public intellectual Yuval Noah Harari wrote recently that he and his team spent weeks "living in a cloud of numbers" to determine how much it would actually cost to prevent catastrophic climate change. "How big a check would we have to write?" The results "should cheer us up." According to the International Energy Agency, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and climate scientists polled by Reuters, achieving a net-zero carbon economy would require us to spend just 2 to 3 percent of annual global GDP over what we already spend on our energy system. This is actually very good news. Increasing investments in eco-friendly technologies and infrastructure by 2 percentage points above 2020 levels can lead us away from the abyss of catastrophic climate change. We clearly don't need to derail the economy to address this existential environmental problem. It is rather an issue of getting our priorities clear. Harari notes that in the first nine months of 2020, governments around the world promoted stimulus measures worth nearly 14 percent of global GDP to address the COVID-19 pandemic. He also notes that the environmental costs from the fossil-fuel industry, combined with government subsidies for fossil fuels, reach a staggering 7 percent of annual global GDP each year. We can clearly afford the financial costs for a transition to a "net-zero" carbon economy. Rather than despairing about the dangers of global warming, let's protect our future by prioritizing these reasonable environmental investments.

While teaching at Eckerd College, I routinely took students to the U.N. in New York City and in Geneva to observe and learn first-hand the practice of international diplomacy. The students and I were struck in these meetings by how often diplomats and activists used the phrase "political will." These international civil servants argued that if national political leaders had the "political will" we could effectively address the critical issues facing humanity such as climate change and global health. These global practitioners are correct. There is an avenue forward toward humane governance. We need courageous political leaders to assert the political will to adopt these affordable programs to bring about the critical transformations to protect our future.

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