

Was 2012 the best year in all human history?

Giancarlo Livraghi – December 2012

I am grateful to Gerry McGovern, who on December 24, 2012 in *New Thinking* www.gerrymcgovern.com/new-thinking/was-2012-greatest-year-human-history mentioned an interesting article published by *The Spectator* on December 15 – with an unusual and “amazing” headline.

THE
SPECTATOR

Why 2012 was the best year ever

Never in the history of the world has there been less hunger, less disease and more prosperity

<http://www.spectator.co.uk/the-week/leading-article/8789981/glad-tidings/>

This statement, of course, met with all sorts of disagreement. It was obviously meant to be controversial. And it's quite clear that it had nothing to do with “glad tidings” for the holiday season or any sort of wishful thinking. But what really matters is that it has more substance than just a “pebble in the pond” to make a dent in the prevailing simplistic doomsday mood.

Statistics are always questionable. And, of course, anyone can choose facts, figures and data that best fit a particular point of view. But it isn't at all irrelevant (nor superficially optimistic) to find that some crucial trends are, indeed, getting better. Above all, it's important to understand which, where, how and why.

Obvious as it is, this needs a short preamble. “Better” doesn't mean “well”. While something is “not as bad as it was”, a lot remains to be done before it can be “all right”. The awful problems quoted by *The Spectator* aren't solved. But it's important to understand which are the most effective forces at play where there are improvements. Quite often, they are not the ones usually considered by “big institutions” and vaguely prevailing opinions.

Let's see some of the examples quoted by *The Spectator* (including the sources and the reasons why they can be considered reliable.)

One of the most surprising observations by *The Spectator* is the evolution of “global poverty”. «*In 1990, the UN announced Millennium Development Goals, the first of which was to halve the number of people in extreme poverty by 2015. It emerged this year that the target was met in 2008.*» This is based on data published by the World Bank on February 29, 2012. The trend is slow, but consistent over time.

http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPOVCALNET/Resources/Global_Poverty_Update_2012_02-29-12.pdf

It’s bewildering that, while we are drowning in a maelstrom of often meaningless conjectures and confusing debates on the so-called economic crisis, and the alarming increase of poverty in “rich” countries, studies such as this one are ignored.

Obviously we are not “halfway there” – not only because “halving” can’t be enough, but even more importantly because when getting out of “extreme” poverty people still remain in conditions of intolerable suffering and sacrifice. But it’s stupid to ignore the fact that there are improvements and they deserve to be understood.

In the whole picture, worldwide, we need to understand that, as *The Spectator* says, «*the great advances of mankind come about not from statesmen, but from ordinary people.*» With this additional comment. «*Governments across the world appear stuck in what Michael Lind describes as an era of “turboparalysis” – all motion, no progress. But outside government, progress has been nothing short of spectacular.*»

Such enthusiasm for “spontaneous improvement” can be exaggerated. But it’s a painfully ignored fact that much more effective results can be obtained by understanding, supporting, stimulating, encouraging the commitment and energy of people, instead of trying to solve all problems (and often making them worse) with decisions enforced “from the top”.

Michael Lind’s article is in the same issue of *The Spectator*.

<http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/8789631/the-age-of-turboparalysis/>

He explains “turboparalysis” as «*a prolonged condition of furious motion without movement in any particular direction, a situation in which the engine roars and the wheels spin but the vehicle refuses to move*».

Not only politics is stranded in this swamp, but also a large part of the general public, confused and scared into selfish conflicts between individual or category interests at the expense of the basic and necessary commitment for shared common good.

To make things even worse, in spite of all the confused chitchat about “globalism” too many people around the world can’t think beyond the borders of their nations (or even smaller regions). No real, and durable, solutions can be in sight if they aren’t understood and developed in a wider perspective.

Before we try to reach a conclusion, or at least a summary, let’s take a look at some other examples collected by *The Spectator*.

«*The average life expectancy in Africa reached 55 this year. Ten years ago, it was 50.*» It's reasonable to believe that it's the highest in all human history. It's obviously still very low (compared to, for instance, over 80 in twenty European countries). In many parts of the world there are still dramatically serious problems, including child mortality. A lot more needs to be done, but we have increasingly relevant resources of experience.

The most useful knowledge grows in the field. Sharing the learning from evolving realities, in different situations and cultures, to support and develop those that are proven to be the most effective.

The same concept applies to the prevention and treatment of diseases, with relevant improvements not only in the more developed countries. Two examples. «*The number of people dying from Aids has been in decline for the last eight years. Deaths from malaria have fallen by a fifth in half a decade.*» Here again, there is much more to be done, but we have useful experience to learn how better results can be achieved.

«*The Peace Research Institute in Oslo says there have been fewer war deaths in the last decade than any time in the last century.*» This can't be precisely measured, for lack of accurately reliable numbers and because it isn't always clear which armed conflicts can be defined as "wars". But it's true that, while in all previous history war was considered unavoidable (and celebrated as "glorious"), for almost seventy years now (since the end of the Second World War) it can no longer be so carelessly defined as a tragically "normal" phase in power conflicts – not even as a "necessary evil".

However even *The Spectator* admits that we can't afford to relax, hoping that "spontaneous improvement" can be strong enough, on its own, to bring gradually under control the situations of war (or, more broadly, organized violence). We also need to understand that, while the evolution of culture and social awareness is always important, it can't be enough to resolve armed conflicts organized and enforced by brutal and merciless power cliques.

This is where, more so than in other cases, international organizations have a necessary role. They are not inactive in trying to prevent or resolve wars, but painfully inadequate in achieving enough effective results.

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In any case, the "paradox" suggested by *The Spectator* can be questionable, but it isn't a useless exercise in nonsensical optimism. It doesn't ignore, nor hide, the seriousness of problems that we need to face. But the reported facts encourage us to understand that solutions are possible – and, to find them, we need above all to learn from those that are already working.

The widespread whining mood is increasing the risk of defeatism, egoism, seeking refuge in distorted privilege or nearsighted selfishness. It's easy to preach empathic solidarity, much more challenging to practice it. But it's the only way to get out of a vicious circle of destructive stupidity.