

The Great Acceleration



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Unit 9 Overview

Innovations in science and technology have come a long way in the last 100 years. We now have vaccines for some of the world's most deadly diseases, safe and efficient modes of transportation, the internet, and much more. But whether these modern innovations have had a positive or a negative impact on society is often unclear.

0:13

Narrator speaking in head bubble; claim in text box

Is the world getting better or worse? Before you answer, consider a few claims. First:

"The world is awful."

Today, 5.2 million children under the age of 5 die each year. This number, given as a percentage of total children of that age, is called the "child mortality rate."

5.2 million children is pretty awful. But here's another claim:

"The world is much better."

Today, the child mortality rate is 3.8 percent. In 1800, it was 43 percent. If it was still that high today, 61 million children would die each year. Much better, right?

But here's one last claim: "the world can be much better."

If everywhere in the world enjoyed the conditions found in the world's richest countries, the child mortality rate would fall from 3.8 percent to under 0.4 percent, about 10 times less. Almost 5 million fewer children would die each year.

These three claims tell us quite a bit about how our world has changed and the problems that remain. Our advances in technology and medicine have saved the lives of millions of children. We've made remarkable improvements, and yet, the benefits of these changes have been unevenly distributed.

At the same time, some of the innovations of our global age have put us in danger. And the harms of these changes are also experienced unequally by people around the world.

Let's look a little closer. One way that we can better understand this is by examining one major cause of child mortality: malaria.

How are child mortality, mosquitoes, and climate change all related, and what did they tell us about globalization? We'll get to that in a minute. But first, I probably need to explain what I mean by "globalization."

Hi, I'm Rachel Hansen, and this is Unit 9: Globalization 1900 to the present.

People who study globalization have offered lots of definitions of the term and many different dates from when it started.

We began this course over 800 years ago. In some ways, the story since then has been one of increasing global connections..

But in the last century, those connections have expanded and intensified through a process called globalization.

After 1945, our world entered a period sometimes called "the Great Acceleration," in which new technologies sped up many trends

Our populations skyrocketed, our economies expanded. We use more energy and produce more stuff than ever before.

2:58

Time lapse

1:03
Child mortality rate graph

Photos showing humanity's advances in science and technology

Photos of the negative impact of innovations

Text box: malaria

1:59
Text box: Unit Overview; transitional music

Text box: Unit 9

Course timeline

World map

Time lapse; text box: The Great Acceleration

Clip of a rotating globe

We are increasingly connected by jet planes, by ships that bring us goods from distant parts of the world, by cell phones and laptops that allow instantaneous communication. This is globalization at a pace we have never experienced before.

Text box: Is the world getting flatter?; photo of a McDonald's

This globalization is sometimes described as causing a flattening of experience around the world. This means that as we all connect and share culture and ideas, the world looks "flatter" to some who study it. As if we're all coming to rest on the same level, more or less, having the same experience.

But other scholars have suggested that globalization is really "lumpy."

3:49

Photos of inequalities in cities; text box: Thematic Overview; transition music

Because its effects are so uneven, it creates inequalities among communities. In this unit, we explore this debate. We ask: How are our lives today similar and different, and how can history help explain these variations and commonalities?

Archaic painting of the Black Death; photo of working children; photo of Nazis

In this class, you've learned about some of humanity's great achievements. Yet, it's a sad truth that we are often the victims of our own progress. In previous units, you've learned how long-distance trade contributed to the Black Death; you've learned about the social problems that grew out of industrialization; and you've seen national revolutions, that were meant to liberate people, morph into extremist ideologies like fascism.

Six themes

Exploring our achievements and our failings through the six themes will better help you evaluate the good and bad of globalization

4:47

Photos depicting society's technological growth

The pace of technological innovation in the past century has revolutionized our world. We've created new technologies and new sources of energy that have allowed us to feed and sustain a rapidly growing population while also allowing instant communication and rapid travel across the globe.

Clip of a ship harbor

Globalization has also connected us in one giant worldwide economic system. The products we use and consume are often grown or made in several different places within several different parts of the world.

Photos of phone stores

Similarly, profits in one part of the world often depend on labor and consumers in entirely different regions. But these profits are not always distributed evenly.

Photos of a global culture; photos of famous cities

Meanwhile, these shifts in technology and production mean that people in different places often consume the same products and culture. In fact, some people have argued that we increasingly share one global culture.

5:47

Clip of national flags

That helps us to understand each other, but also means that some local cultures and traditions are disappearing.

Our forms of governance are also globalizing. Once, the nation-state seemed to be the ultimate form of government. Today, our interactions often transcend borders. International organizations like the United Nations attempt to regulate an increasingly complex and global world.

Photo of Ukrainian president giving a speech

Photo of a city; photos of protestors

But somehow, there is still a great deal of war and conflict.

Maybe this is partly because the effects of globalization have been uneven and unequal. It seems to create vast benefits for some people, but only limited change for others, and great suffering for some. As a result, in many places, people resist elements of globalization.

The rapid pace of innovation has allowed us to affect our environment more than ever before.

6:45

Photo of a factory; clips showing the impact of climate change; text box: Illustrative Example; transition music

But many of our innovations have had disastrous effects on our environment. Climate change threatens all of us, but some people will experience much greater harm than others. We can see one clear example of this by examining the connections between malaria and climate change.

Photo of a mosquito; photo of a malaria headlines

Malaria is a deadly disease caused by a parasite carried by mosquitoes. It's one of the leading causes of child mortality. Since 1946, the world has made incredible progress in fighting malaria.

World map of malaria deaths

Take a look at this map. Historically, malaria was present in about half the world since 1946. Malaria has been contained to 27 of Earth's land mass. Fewer people die of the disease, and it's found in fewer places. That's a remarkable change.

7:39

But look at those dark purple parts of the map. That's where malaria is still a big problem, thanks to environmental conditions. Those purple areas also contain some of the world's poorest regions, where lack of access to medicine, insecticides, and other preventatives makes the disease much more deadly. 94 percent of the 409,000 people who died of malaria in 2019 lived in Africa.

Malaria reveals both the benefits and lumpiness of globalization. Our innovations in international cooperation have eliminated this disease in many places and helped lower child mortality. Yet, not everyone in the world has experienced these benefits equally.

Text box with the four claims

Do you remember the three claims I read at the beginning of this video? The world is awful, it's much better, it can be much better. There's a fourth: without action, the world could get much worse. Malaria is a case in point.

8:39

Map and chart of malaria deaths

As this map and chart show, humanity has made incredible progress against malaria. However, since 2017, death rates have started to rise again. Why?

Text box: climate change; clips showing the impact of climate change

Well, the answer also has to do with another one of the impacts of globalization: climate change. Our use of fossil fuels has transformed the planet. Changes in rainfall, temperature, and humidity are expected to increase the geographical range of malaria again and to make it even worse in places where it already exists. These changes will disproportionately affect low-income countries, who will see increased deaths and negative economic impacts.

Clip of children getting vaccinated; graph of the number of people in poverty; photo of a vaccine

9:39

Clip of air pollution and a clip of climate change across the globe; photo of a flood

*Text box with question:
How can history...*

Modern science and globalization have allowed us to fight diseases like malaria and drastically reduce child mortality. We've seen a billion people escape extreme poverty. We've created vaccines and medicines that have eliminated diseases that used to ravage our species.

These are the miracles of our age. And yet, the same forces that make this possible also threaten to unravel all the astounding achievements of the last century. We will all suffer from climate change, but as the example of malaria highlights, some will suffer much more than others.

Globalization has been uneven and unequal. Yet, global diseases like malaria and global challenges like climate change remind us that humanity shares many challenges in common. These are complex problems. How can the history of the last eight centuries help you understand them now, and how can it help you prepare for the future?



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