

## Citizens' despondency about the future is a disease of the G7



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In the world today, the richer a country is, the more despondent its people tend to feel about the future. In every G7 country, most people believe that the world will be worse for their children than it was for them; in emerging economies it is the other way around. And G7 citizens tend to be less open to change than people in less rich countries.

This dispiriting combination of feelings among G7 citizens risks undermining societal well-being, business growth, and climate action—so political, business, and environmental leaders have a shared interest in tackling the despondency.

We explore the implications of this societal picture in a forthcoming research report in collaboration with the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership. In this short paper we focus on understanding the despondency itself, and its relationship not just to GDP/capita, but to GDP growth over a generational timeframe.

## When today is as good as it gets

How do people in different parts of the world feel about the future?

In a survey of 58,000 people,<sup>1</sup> we asked citizens of 23 countries how they feel on two dimensions: *optimism* and *openness*.

To test optimism, we asked to what extent they agreed that 'the world will be a better place for our children than it was for me.'

To test openness, we asked to what extent they agreed that 'change is always good and a sign of progress, even if it's not what I was hoping for.'

Figure 1 shows the mean agreement with these two statements in each country.

The two dimensions are correlated: most countries lie in a band from bottom left to top right ( $R^2=0.67$ ). More significantly, most countries group according to their level of wealth (GDP per capita).

All the G7 countries lie in the bottom left, where people lack both optimism and openness to change. The optimism scores are net negative. The openness scores are mildly net positive (the average is above 3 on a 1-5 scale), but lower than in other countries.

The G7 position shows a dispiriting combination of feelings. It says that the world will be worse

for our children, but we are wary of changing it. Today is as good as it gets.

By contrast, the mindset in emerging markets and developing economies is much more positive: optimistic for the next generation, and open to what change might bring.

## Driven by GDP and generational growth

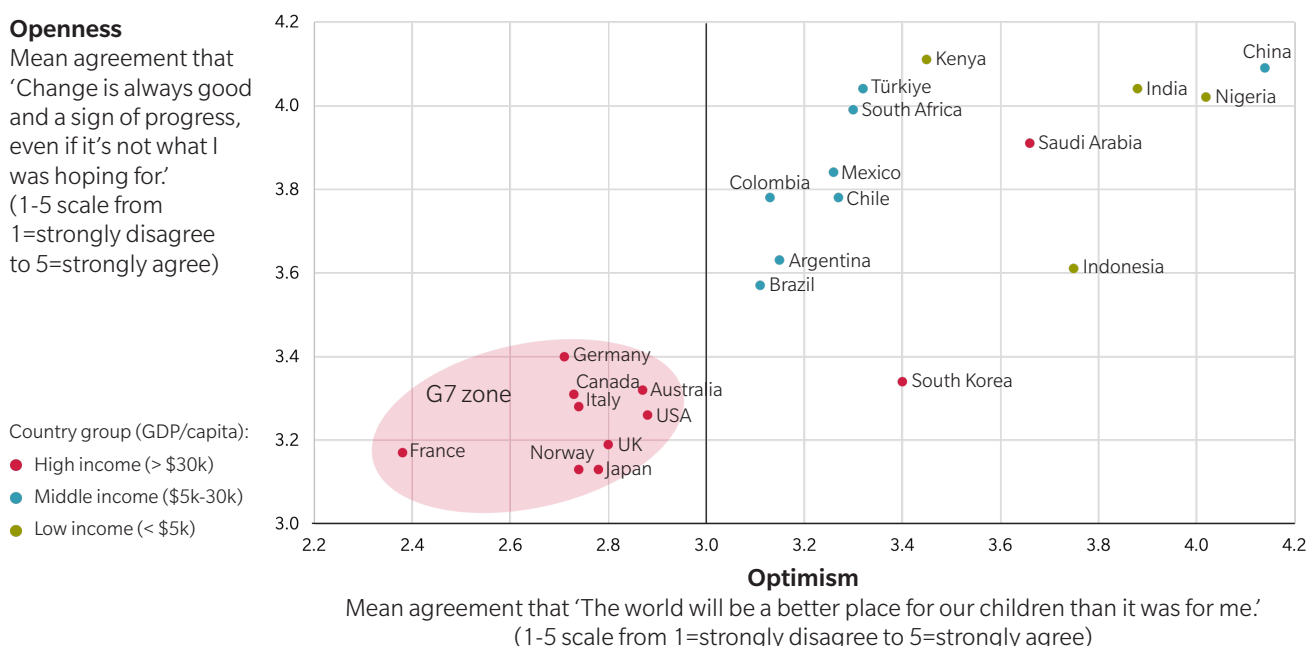
Where does this despondency come from? What marks out the G7 (and other rich countries, such as Norway and Australia) in this way?

Statistical analysis of the variation across countries suggest important and distinct influences of both GDP and GDP growth. The growth that matters is not current growth (the feeling of being in a growing economy), but growth over a generational timeframe (the feeling that society is richer now than in our parents' generation).<sup>2</sup>

Table 1 shows the contribution of GDP and GDP growth, as factors explaining countries' levels of optimism and openness, in a regression model:

- GDP/capita is the main driver of openness;
- Generational growth is the main driver of optimism;
- Together, these two metrics explain most of the variation between countries;
- Current GDP growth has negligible explanatory power.

**Figure 1.**  
**Optimism and openness about the future, among the citizens of different countries**



**Table 1.**  
**Explanation of inter-country variation in optimism and openness about the future**

Explanatory power ( $R^2$ )	Optimism	Openness
GDP/capita	0.44	<b>0.61</b>
Generational growth in GDP/capita (20-year rate)	<b>0.62</b>	0.44
Bivariate model (GDP and generational growth)	<b>0.72</b>	<b>0.70</b>
Current growth in GDP/capita (2-year rate)	0.21	0.07

Why measure GDP growth over 20 years? We ran the same regression model with measures of GDP growth over different time periods, ranging from 1 to 40 years (Figure 2).

As already seen in Table 1, we found that the *current* GDP growth rate has almost no power in explaining either optimism or openness about the future. But GDP growth over a generation has a significant explanatory power.

Starting from the right of the chart, the power increases steadily until we go back about 15 years, where the effect plateaus. Probably not coincidentally, that takes us back to 2008, the time of the Global Financial Crisis. Explanatory power stays high until we move beyond a single generation (typically 25-30 years).

Because of the flatness of the plateau (represented by the shaded area in Figure 2), the exact length of measurement is not critical. For simplicity, to fairly represent the plateau, and to avoid looking back further into historic data than necessary, we have used 20 years for our measure of generational growth.

### Feeling the loss of the future

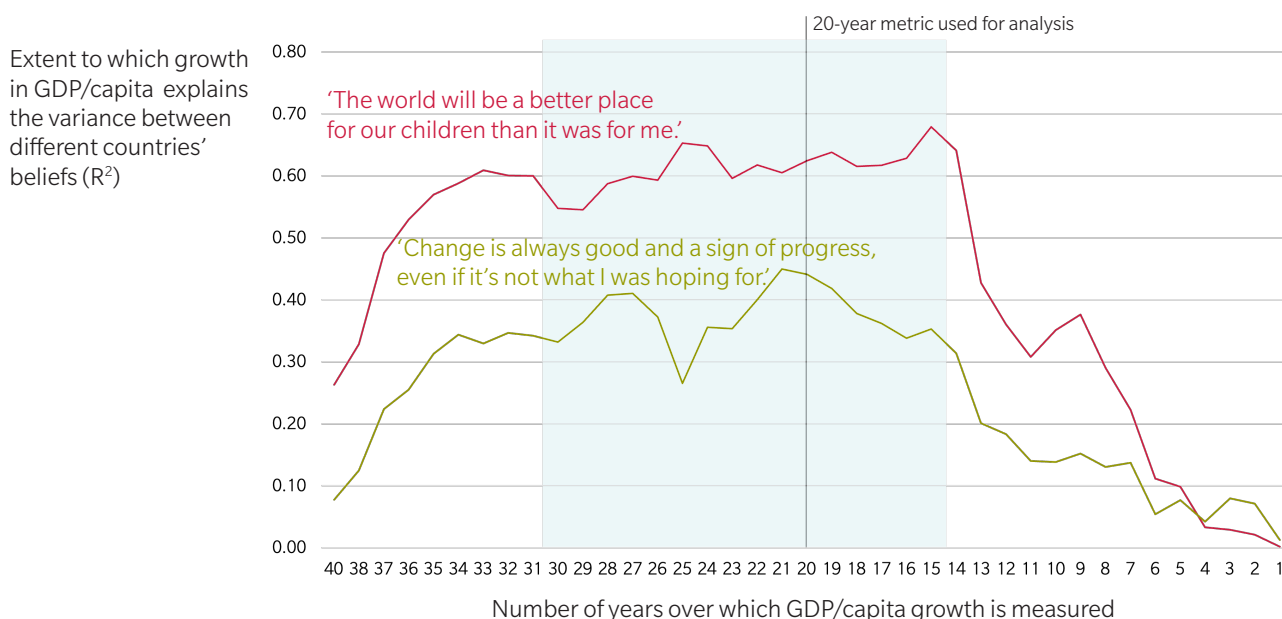
The loss of growth over a generation appears to drive what Ipsos, in their 2024 *Global Trends* report, describe as ‘loss of the future’.<sup>3</sup> On average, over the past generation, people in the most developed countries (including the G7) have seen:

- Loss of share, power and global leadership to emerging countries;
- Aging populations, declining fertility;
- Historically low gain in labour productivity (less than 1% per year);<sup>4</sup>
- Increased borrowing against the future,<sup>5</sup> so that limited future gains are already banked.

For hundreds of years, human progress has been the natural way of things, enabled by economic growth and energy consumption, and seen in many metrics of health, wealth, security, connectedness, longevity and lifestyle. In most of the world it still is: we see that reflected in optimism and openness about the future in emerging markets and developing economies.

But not for most of the public in the G7. And they are feeling the loss.

**Figure 2. Explanatory power of GDP growth over different time periods**



## Appendix

### A note on research methodology

This paper analyzes the data from a 57,968-respondent, 23-country research study by Potential Energy Coalition and Zero Ideas in partnership with Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and Meliore Foundation. The fieldwork for this study was conducted by Dynata between June and August 2023. Each country has more than 2,000 respondents.

The primary focus of this study was on what moves and motivates people to support government-led climate action. The research report on that topic was published in November 2023, titled *Later is Too Late*.<sup>6</sup> A subsequent report on the political aspect of these motivations, using

the same data, was published by Zero Ideas in August 2024, titled *Unleashing multipartisan support for climate action*.<sup>7</sup>

The questions about optimism and openness are each asked on a 1-5 scale, so a score above 3.0 represents net agreement with each statement at the population level.

The regression analyses exclude Nigeria from the set of 23 countries, because the dramatic jumps in GDP/capita that Nigeria experienced in response to oil price shocks, especially in the 1990s, overshadow other effects if included.

## Authors

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## About Zero Ideas

Zero Ideas is a research and education charity established to challenge leadership thinking on climate action. We conduct primary and secondary research and publish articles and research reports to inform business and other leaders on climate issues and to drive a more ambitious leadership mindset regarding climate action.

Recent research projects and collaborations have explored:

- Climate worry is moving right;
- Popular support for the science and technologies that can help stop climate change;
- The use of theories of change to assess and guide corporate climate action;
- What moves and motivates people to support climate action across the G20 and beyond;
- Why sustainable finance supply needs industrial strategy demand;
- Understanding and responding to public demand for nuclear energy;

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## Endnotes

- 1 John Marshall, Jessica Lu, Simon Glynn, Anthony Leiserowitz and Tom Brookes (2023), Later is too late: A comprehensive analysis of the messaging that accelerates climate action in the G20 and beyond, *Potential Energy Coalition*, <https://zeroideas.org/late-is-too-late/>. See methodology in the appendix to this paper.
- 2 GDP/capita figures in this analysis are measured in current US\$, sourced from The World Bank. Latest year is 2023, which is the year of the fieldwork for the metrics of openness and optimism.  
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>
- 3 Ipsos Global Trends (2024), p5. <https://www.ipsos.com/en/global-trends-2024/category/global-trends-2024>
- 4 OECD (2024), Gender equality and economic growth: Past progress and future potential, Figure 3. Annualized data for 2000-2022, typically <1%. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/fb0a0a93-en>.
- 5 IMF household debt/GDP averages 69% across G7 countries, averaged 2006-2024.
- 6 See (1)
- 7 Simon Glynn (2024), Unleashing multi-partisan support for climate action, Zero Ideas, <https://doi.org/10.70272/lzhq>