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Building Utopia: What global issues would you prioritize?
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One of my favorites quotes (which I believe is from this documentary on the Faroes Islands) sounds more or less like this: "Before Nature was big and man was small, and Nature was taking care of man. Now Man is big and nature is small, and Man must take care of nature". So my starting point is that there is a dualism between man and nature. More specifically, we can distinguish between two endpoints, or priorities: the wellbeing of humans and the wellbeing of ecosystems. Each of those in turn can be subdivided in intrinsic and instrumental components, for example biodiversity is a component of the ecosystem with an intrinsic value. This is explained very well in various scientific literature and for example also in the Millennium ecosystems assessment report.

Right now it is my impression that the wellbeing of ecosystems is under increasing pressure and reversing this trend would be my first priority. We see a mass extinction of species and a substantial change in the area, structure, and functioning of ecosystems due to the negative impacts of human activities, such as e.g. climate change.

Although we live in an imperfect society and the level of wellbeing of individuals varies substantially across geographies, in my understanding we have made substantial progress in decreasing inequality, poverty, and improving health conditions globally during the last century. We also have much less war taken the whole human history as perspective.

Unfortunately prioritizing the wellbeing of ecosystems might in some cases signify reducing the wellbeing of humans, this trade-off is inevitable, and we could also argue that current levels of human wellbeing are so high exactly because they were achieved at the expenses of the wellbeing of ecosystems. Perhaps in some regions of the world improving human wellbeing must be the priority. However, it is also true that under ecological collapse we would have a very different civilization, if we would have one at all.

I was asked to make a priority using the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I don't think the SDGs offer an easy framework because some are related (e.g. climate action and life on land), some might be achieved at the expense of the other (e.g. growth and land use), and in order to prioritize them one would need to go one step further and determine what are the ultimate effects of not achieving these goals, in terms of impact on humans and ecosystems. However, my wish list is to achieve as soon as possible SDG13 'climate action' and SDG15 'life on land' as these address directly the wellbeing of ecosystems globally. Furthermore, I would argue SDG16 'Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions' is the next in order of priority, as war is probably the single biggest threat to human wellbeing, and strong institutions are a prerequisite to achieve other goals such as reducing poverty.

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