Suppose we bring climate change under control and deal with its fallout. What will have we achieved?

We will have prevented great harm. That, of course, is the main goal. Untamed climate change means an dangerous, ugly future for all of us on “Spaceship Earth.” Preventing that future is surely enough of a reason to dedicate ourselves to the effort. I’m asking about something different, however: how will the world be better off than it would have been if climate change had never been a problem?

“Success,” of course, doesn’t mean that at some point we can forget about the climate issue. Climate adaptation will be a high priority for decades. (Alternatively, if we end up using geoengineering, we’ll have to maintain that effort for even longer.). Some climate impacts are going to be unavoidable, and we’re going to have to live with those. If we work really hard, however, we can keep the impacts manageable. Accomplishing that will be no easy feat. What does it buy us?

For one thing, we will have improved the environment in other ways. Urban air pollution kills millions of people around the world. Eliminating fossil fuels will radically reduce that problem. We will also get rid of coal mines and oil wells, which produce other kinds of pollution today. There are important co-benefits of the fight to reduce emissions. We will also have preserved important tropical forests and their incredibly rich and diverse ecosystems.

Succeeding in the climate arena will also show that human beings can cooperate to address global issues, just as we did in protecting the ozone layer and eliminating smallpox. In the process, we will have developed a richer set of tools for achieving policy ends. It’s already become clear that this isn’t just a matter of strengthening traditional international institutions or laws. Addressing climate change so far has involved bottom-up actions by states, cities, and corporations, including new forms of collaboration. Climate change is far from our only global problem, and what we’ve learned from addressing this problem should help us address others.

Finally, perhaps we will have succeeded in broadening the circle of human concern. We all seem naturally most interested in the welfare of those who are near us in space and time. Perhaps people will be more attuned to the problems of people in other parts of the world and of future generations.

There’s a big “if”, of course. *If* we succeed. Let’s get back to work, folks.