

Sustaining Sustainable

Twenty years ago, an international commission coined a phrase and stimulated a new way of thinking. Where do we stand today?

20 Twenty years ago, the international commission which the United Nations had asked me to establish and chair laid before you its findings based on years of hard work, of learning, and of sharing experience.

The unpretentiously looking book carried the name *Our Common Future*, which we found fitting, since it dealt with nothing less than our survival together, rich countries as well as poor countries. It came at a point in our history when awareness was growing that we share this one world, and that we risked overstepping limits, unless we adapted our use of natural resources to the long-term carrying capacity of the planet. But it was also clear that the vast majority of the world's population only had a small share in this over-use of our finite resources. Unequal opportunity and unequal distribution were at the heart of the problem.

The challenge of meeting the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs was moulded by the Commission into the concept of sustainable development, the new political concept that includes equity and justice, within and between generations.

The Commission based the report on an all-encompassing approach. We addressed the role of the international economy, as we addressed population and education, food security, species and ecosystems, energy, industry and the urban challenge, the oceans, space and Antarctica. We addressed how we need to organize the international community, based on the Charter of the United Nations, the universal human rights and the fundamental freedoms.

The Commission came to the conclusion that endemic poverty, prevalent and abject poverty, had to be radically reduced before we could speak of progress, and eliminated before we could claim success. Poverty is a scar on humani-

ty's face: poverty degrades people and it degrades the environment.

While the Commission worked, we experienced industrial and nuclear catastrophes, the growing threat to the ozone-layer, famines, drought and increase in pandemic diseases. To the surprise of many the report did not paint a picture of doom or defeat, but presented a strong message of hope. While humankind doubtless had the capacity to destroy the global equilibrium between itself and the biosphere, it never had greater capacities and possibilities to save that fragile relationship. The world accepted this challenge and went to Rio in 1992, for the Earth Summit.

We experienced the high expectations of the Cairo conference on population, and we listened to the millions of voices demanding freedom and equality at the Beijing women's conference. Then, we rejoiced over the triumphs and mourned the defeats at Kyoto.

From there and a multitude of gatherings, we went to New York where we adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which together with other development goals will remain our guiding beacon. And in Johannesburg we expressed frustrations and impatience, but managed to move the issues forward at the world summit in 2002.

True, there were periods of cooling off and complacency, but 20 years later, fortunately, we can safely say that we are making progress in many areas. Poverty is still our gravest challenge. We are six billion people co-existing on our fragile planet, many of whom are dangerously short of the food, water and the security they need. Fortunately, many countries experience brisk economic growth. In contrast, many countries in Africa find themselves in a vicious cycle with negative growth, suffering on the fringes of the world economy.

Development

by Gro Harlem Brundtland

But hundreds of millions are leaving the valleys of despair to climb the heights of justice and prosperity, not least in Asia. This is the single most important expansion of welfare and prosperity in our lifetime, and probably in all of history.

Girls and women are still discriminated against and treated inhumanly and degradingly in many countries and cultures. But trends point in the right direction, not least for the girls' education. And which countries are experiencing the highest growth rates? Those countries that practice equal opportunities. Gender equality means a competitive advantage.

Access to safe drinking water in developing countries is increasing. The Millennium Development Goal of halving the share of people without access to safe water may be reached globally, but with greater success in Asia than in Africa. Access to basic sanitation is increasing as well, but not quickly enough to be in line for the MDG of halving the share without access by 2015. Still, water scarcity, water pollution and overuse of groundwater resources is a survival issues in many countries and regions. Many hold this problem to be even more critical than the threat of climate change.

During five of this score of years on which we are looking back, I had the privilege to serve at the helm of the World Health Organization (WHO). Recently, I received a new calling, when I accepted the UN Secretary-General's request that I become one of his three Special Envoys for Climate Change. I pay tribute to him for focussing on climate so strongly, already from the start of his tenure. His leadership is essential, and we are many who will support him and stand by him.

Many of the challenges of sustainable development are possible to solve within sectors and countries. Many such challenges can be solved by individual countries or groups of countries. But not climate change. We are all victimized together and nobody can hide from it. Nobody can buy protection

The theories about the physical effect of carbon dioxide (CO₂) concentrations on the global climate were presented



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more than a hundred years ago. Twenty years ago, the World Commission underlined the findings of scientists from 30 countries gathered in Villach, Austria, in 1985, under the auspices of the World Meteorological Organization, UNEP and the International Council of Science. This forerunner to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated that man-made climate change was possible and plausible.

At the Toronto climate conference in 1988, I used the occasion to propose that an international convention be established, to deal with science, technology transfer and concrete measures to reduce emissions of harmful gases. We signed that convention four years later.

So what is new today? It is new that doubt is eliminated. The IPCC report is clear, and so is the Stern report (by N. Stern, UK). It is irresponsible, reckless and deeply amoral to question the seriousness of the situation: the time for diagnosis is over, the time to act is now.

We, the industrialized countries, must assume the largest responsibility. We are the ones who have filled up the atmosphere. We must carry the greatest responsibility for reducing emissions. We must fight some struggles and overcome some obstacles.

Let me focus on three factors. Firstly, the effect of climate change will not be felt until long after the political decisions that need to be taken. Secondly, no one nation alone can resolve it. It has no definable boundaries. It is hard even for the largest country to make a difference on its own. Thirdly, and most importantly, we are hampered by a deep-rooted lack of trust. Lack of trust between the industrialized and developing countries and within groups of countries.

Many industrialized countries believe that the developing countries are unwilling, and that they are doing too little. Many developing countries believe that the industrialized world has defaulted on the promise of financial and technology assistance. Many countries are concerned with costs and competitiveness, while many are reluctant to undertake obligations that others will escape.

We must be sensitive to such concerns as we move forward, but we should not be blinded or lose faith in the cause. We must build trust and find the common ground. Kyoto contains concrete obligations for countries which are only responsible for around 30% of present global emissions. We must have much higher ambitions for the new agreement. This will require participation of the countries that produce the highest emissions, not just the USA, but also major developing countries. They, too, will have to take on concrete emissions commitments.

The government of my own country, Norway, is taking on new commitments. Firstly, by surpassing the Kyoto commitments: in the period up to 2012 Norway will sharpen its emission cuts by 10% more than its Kyoto obligations. Secondly, Norway will cut emissions of greenhouse gases equivalent to 30% of our 1990 emissions by 2020.

But this is not enough. By 2050, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions will have to be reduced much more drastically, and rich countries need to become carbon neutral.

Thus, the third commitment is that by 2050, Norway will undertake to reduce global GHG emissions equivalent to 100% of all our emissions.

These goals will be achieved by implementing substantial measures in Norway and by using the Kyoto mechanisms. The measures in Norway include the construction of the world's first gas-fired power plant fitted with a full-scale carbon capture and storage system. This is something that has never been done before — it has not even been contemplated before.

When we succeed, we hope we will have the technology which can clean coal-fired plants at a cost that makes it commercially attractive. Such technology is not only crucial for our climate. It will give us many other benefits locally and regionally, not least for public health.

Such carbon capture solutions applied internationally, in clean development mechanism projects, can generate a trillion dollar business. Such projects will transfer technology and they will lead to substantial financial flows to developing countries from new and additional sources of finance, by engaging the private sector. In short, there is a great potential in developing incentives for change and investment.

Developing countries have a right to develop: make no mistake, none of us should be asking developing countries to slow down their ascent towards prosperity. But they must be enabled to leap-frog the more polluting stages of development that many of us went through in the past.

Today, I believe we stand on the threshold of a new, green economy: a low-carbon economy which can rid the world of poverty and save the climate. This is our calling, and it can be done. We must move forward on a broad front: improve energy efficiency, increase the use of renewables, improve agricultural and forestry practices and focus on adaptation, in particular for the least developed countries and small island states.

To really make progress we must develop a truly global carbon market, based on an expanding range of clean development mechanisms. The really big investment will come when finance ministers and Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) demand emission reductions because they are compelled to pay for their CO₂ emissions! Great achievements often start with a vision that seems to be bordering on madness, and many of the most important scientific breakthroughs were underrated at first. How much money was it right to spend on developing the first electric light-bulb?

Around 40,000-70,000 years ago humankind took up its struggle with the biosphere. Two hundred years ago we seemed able to control it. But we turned out to be like the magicians apprentice. The year 2007 will be critical, and political leaders who believe that the world will return to business as usual will have a rude rendezvous with their constituencies. We need to start now to build a global regime that will be effective. You may think we may fail, but I believe we will not, because failing is not an option.

Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland is UN Special Envoy for Climate Change. Her article is based on a keynote speech she delivered at the 15th session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) held earlier this year.