Forum Interview

with Gro Harlem Brundtland

Planet Earth—suicide or survival?

Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway responds to questions about the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, which she chaired. Over a period of three years the Commission, comprising 22 members from a wide diversity of countries, travelled extensively, gathered evidence, and listened to the views of many people. Its findings were issued in the form of a book, *Our common future* (1).

*Prime Minister, humanity is endangered by a host of self-inflicted problems, among them desertification, deforestation, depletion of nonrenewable resources, and pollution. The World Commission on Environment and Development was set up by the United Nations to study this situation and recommend how to deal with it. What is the main message of the Commission’s report?*

The main message is one of serious warning but also of hope. Many of today’s efforts to maintain progress and to realize human ambitions are unsustainable. They draw too heavily on already overdrawn environmental accounts. We are borrowing environmental capital from future generations. Thus we are rapidly limiting our options for the future. In a world where poverty is endemic and where a small percentage of the world population consumes finite resources as if they were infinite, there is little hope that we will be able to solve the environmental problems that are growing more serious day by day. Poverty and inequality between and within nations is both the planet’s main environmental problem and its main developmental problem.

For the first time in human history we have the capacity to ruin this planet. But we also have the capacity to save it and to adjust many development trends. Our collective human and technological capacities can and should be used to make the necessary changes. All the changes that need to be made, and their common goal, have been included in the political concept of sustainable development, which the Commission defined as the paths of human progress that meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the possibilities of future generations to meet their needs. Economic growth is a prerequisite for sustainable development. Growth is necessary to eradicate poverty and to create the capacity for solving environmental problems. But the substance and quality of growth need to be changed.
Gro Harlem Brundtland

Mrs Gro Harlem Brundtland was born in 1939, graduated from the Medical School of the University of Oslo in 1963 and received a Master’s degree in Public Health from Harvard University in 1965. From 1966 to 1968 she served as Medical Officer in the Norwegian Directorate of Health. From 1969 to 1974 she was Assistant Medical Director of the Oslo Board of Health.

She was Minister of the Environment in the Norwegian Government from May 1974 to October 1979. She served on the parliamentary Finance Committee and subsequently chaired the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Constitution. She was also Deputy Leader of the Labour Party Parliamentary Group.

In February 1981 she became Prime Minister, which office she held until October of the same year. In April 1981 she took over as Leader of the Labour Party, and in May 1986 she again became Prime Minister.

Mrs Brundtland is Vice-President of the Socialist International and a member of the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security. She chaired the World Commission on Environment and Development. Her address is Prime Minister’s Office, Oslo DEP, Norway.

There are limits imposed by Nature which we must respect, otherwise important life-support systems may be irrevocably damaged. However, the Commission found no reason for asserting that there were limits to growth. On the contrary, we said there were no such limits which could be defined today.

The quality of growth and the political changes that we call for must be based on decision-making systems where the environmental impact of any given action is fully integrated into other relevant considerations. We must break away from the react-and-cure approach to environmental problems. Instead we must anticipate and prevent.

In your foreword you say that you see no programmes or policies offering any real hope of narrowing the growing gap between rich and poor countries. What basic changes are needed before the situation can improve?

Present policies are aggravating the problems rather than contributing to lasting solutions. The debt crisis, commodity prices,

We have the capacity to ruin this planet, but we also have the capacity to save it.

terms of trade, protectionism, agricultural subsidies and surplus agricultural production in the North are all factors that strangle the growth potential of developing countries. Unless we find lasting solutions to these problems the developing countries will have little alternative but to continue to exploit their natural resources excessively just to maintain present levels of income.

The Baker plan outlined a country-by-country approach aimed at stimulating growth and reducing debt. So far, growth has been sorely lacking. We have to accept that many debts will never be paid back in any real sense. Many countries are considering writing off the debts of African countries south of the Sahara.

We should keep an open mind about new ways of securing stable and higher income for developing countries. Their market access will also have to be improved. The Uruguay Round must be used for the benefit of developing countries.

As regards development assistance, we know that internationally agreed targets are far
Forum Interview

from being met. Many countries could do a lot better. New funds ought to be provided for projects that aim at sustainable development. We have to recognize that it is in the developed countries’ interest to boost development in the Third World.

Popular concern about the environment is often expressed in terms of health or disease. This was clearly the case with the Bhopal and Chernobyl disasters. And yet, health was not one of the eight key issues selected by the Commission for analysis, and health concerns are given only about three pages in the report. Could you please comment on this?

I disagree. Every page of the report is about health. Why do we deal so extensively with nuclear energy if not because it is a potential hazard to health? Why are we concerned about toxic wastes if not because they threaten human well-being? And why do we devote a chapter to food security if health in the widest sense is not on our minds? The issues selected for analysis by the Commission do not represent ultimate objectives, but are factors with a bearing on our quest for progress.

Many of today’s efforts to maintain progress are unsustainable

If you had said that the report did not deal directly with medical views, I would have agreed, but that is another issue.

The report concentrates on man-made environmental problems, as if Rousseau’s dream of the natural terrestrial paradise were true. However, according to WHO statistics, two-thirds of mankind struggle against adverse natural conditions such as unsafe water, disease vectors, unfavourable climatic conditions, and so on. Would it be fair to say that the common concerns of North and South have been given priority over very serious matters that only affect the South?

Rousseau said a lot of things, but he didn’t live according to his teachings. We believe we have struck the right balance between what is possible and what is desirable. If you read our chapter on the role of industry, you will find very little of Rousseau in it.

The Commission is convinced that the generation and distribution of wealth within and between nations is decisive for our opportunities to deal with social and environmental problems. We say that economic growth can create the capacity to solve these problems. We also indicate how resources can be used to alleviate problems at the national, and even at the local, level. We find that there are very few issues that concern only the North or the South. The interactions and relationships between the various issues are evident throughout our report.

It is sometimes said that ecology is a luxury of the rich and that developing countries cannot afford to be too concerned about the negative effects of development on the environment. Prime Minister Mugabe of Zimbabwe has said: “It is only when we can survive today that we can talk of tomorrow”. What is your message to the developing nations in this respect?

I believe that if we quote Mr Mugabe on these issues, we should also quote what he said in the General Assembly of the United Nations when the report was considered there last autumn. I believe his words made a very strong impact on all of us who were present: “What is before us is a means to an
end and not the end itself. We should resist the tendency to quibble about this or that word or phrase in the report. Let us use the bricks in this report to build the house we want to live in.”

Huge industrial interests, both private and public, seem to be more concerned with quick financial gain than with environmental protection and sustainable development. How can they be induced to consider the common good rather than short-term profit?

Many investment projects have recently been undertaken which point in the right direction, even if the decisions taken are far from sufficient. But there is also an overall trend which is bringing to light questions concerning the quality of the atmosphere that all nations share. Many important newspapers and periodicals have been running feature stories on toxic emissions and what they are doing to the atmosphere. The ozone protocol from Montreal is an example of a multilateral agreement that has set standards based on the assumption, rather than on clear evidence, that we may be approaching the point of no return with regard to chlorofluorocarbons and that the earth’s climate may be at risk. If this kind of approach could be adopted in other areas as well, for instance in respect of atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide and sulfur dioxide, we would have reason for cautious optimism. Far-reaching, long-term decisions will have to come. I believe that the major industrialized countries see that they are, in fact, losing in the economic sense. We have seen figures indicating that the Federal Republic of Germany is suffering enormously from air pollution initiated both at home and abroad. Thus I believe we are living through a process of change and that countries such as Norway and the other Nordic states, which have already gathered a lot of data, may experience growing acceptance of their ideas about what needs to be done and how soon action should be taken.

The green movement has gained considerable ground during the last few years, both in the area of protest and as a political force. What is the role of the community and nongovernmental organizations in the battle for sustainable development, and how can their demands be given political expression?

We should not underestimate the political impact of the green movement, which has brought about a situation in which all political parties have an additional motive for adjusting their environmental policies to make their programmes more attractive.

In Norway we have started a joint campaign involving nongovernmental organizations and political parties as a framework for a process of interaction between key players. We have also invited more than one hundred organizations to participate in a discussion of the Commission’s report and its implications for Norway. The papers submitted will be carefully assessed by the government as we continue our national follow-up process. I believe that what we do could inspire other countries to try the same path. I know that Canada has established an infrastructure which in many ways is similar to our own, and which also involves the business community. Trade unions have a pivotal role as well.
In the report we point to the need for a broad debate, nationally and internationally, recognizing as we do that governments cannot act in a vacuum.

The Commission recommends that the World Health Organization’s health-for-all strategy “be broadened far beyond the provision of medical workers and clinics to cover health-related interventions in all development activities”. The strategy is already clear on that and requests health authorities to insist on seeing evidence that investments in economic development will improve the quality of life. However, health authorities usually have little influence on the formulation of socioeconomic development plans. How might this be changed?

I agree that our remarks about the health-for-all strategy could have been more precisely phrased. I am aware that the strategy document calls for intersectoral action. I also know that intersectoral collaboration was one of the topics of the 1986 technical discussions of the World Health Assembly and that this body has passed a number of resolutions to remind

We must break away from the react-and-cure approach to environmental problems. Instead we must anticipate and prevent.

Member States of the need to think beyond the health sector when formulating health policies.

However, when you come down to national health-for-all strategies, very few countries have health policies that extend beyond the health sector. In health matters, as in matters relating to environmental, agricultural or socioeconomic development issues, we need a reorientation of people—from all walks of life. Health is not the product of the health sector—nor is sustainable development that of any particular sector. We need to learn to think in new ways, and we need institutional reorientation.

The health sector today has to deal with a host of problems created through the mismanagement of environmental and economic resources; through its task of providing health care for those fortunate enough to reach health services, it becomes the caretaker of essential information—which might serve as an indicator of management ability as well as of political will.

The global health-for-all strategy calls for a reorientation of health services to support the development of comprehensive health systems. The Harare Declaration of August 1987 sets out 12 points of action for strengthening district health systems and lays special emphasis on the need for intersectoral planning and action at the district level, the development of district leadership and management skills, the mobilization and management of resources, and international support.

The health services have a major role to play in providing and promoting information about the effects of socioeconomic development and environmental conditions on health, and especially about the way such development affects equality. This kind of knowledge is a prerequisite for planning and must be made available to every level in all sectors with an impact on health to enable them to participate effectively in planning for health for all. Reorientation is needed not only in the health sector but also in other sectors, which will have to accept
health authorities as partners with certain coordinating responsibilities.

_The report provides a number of general recommendations. When do you think the international community will be ready to accept binding guidelines and regulations in the field of environment and development?_

We should not underestimate the results already achieved in a number of sectors. The norms and guidelines already incorporated into existing conventions and agreements are considerable, even though they are still not sufficient. What we can hope for is an accelerating process in which international minimum standards evolve and become generally accepted, be it in the form of binding rules or non-binding recommendations. You will notice that in the report we have not been too specific as to what should become subject to international law within a given time. The report indicates trends that will have to be changed if we are to achieve sustainable development. We also say that the next few decades will be crucial and that time is running out if we are to avoid putting important global life-support systems at risk. But let me emphasize that I do not see it as an objective in itself that binding rules be adopted in all fields relevant to environment and development. The most important task now is to develop a broad process of learning which will change people’s ways of thinking about these issues. If we succeed in integrating environmental concerns into decision-making at all levels, a central recommendation in the report, the practical need for binding legal instruments will be diminished.

_You are the main author of the report and you are also the Norwegian Prime Minister. How do you intend to implement its recommendations? What problems and constraints do you foresee in Norway and elsewhere?_

The report is a consensus document and neither I nor any other member of the Commission will claim to be the main author. Many of us hold responsible offices, serving in government or in other capacities. We are all committed to working for the implementation of the report in various countries, regions, sectors and constituencies. As Prime Minister of Norway, I intend to pursue an active follow-up process, both in my own country and internationally.

In Norway we have initiated a broad follow-up procedure, in which all ministries have been asked to review the report to assess and evaluate what should be done and in what time perspective. Political parties, nongovernmental organizations, the scientific community, trade unions and private enterprise have been asked to express their views about how the report is relevant to them and what they believe will be the priority issues for responsible follow-up.

Norway will pursue a consistent foreign policy incorporating issues of environment and development, and will work in international organizations, bilaterally, and regionally. We shall seek partners in all parts of the world. The Nordic countries have established close and very concrete
cooperation with other states. The constraints which confront us will primarily be of an economic nature. But there is clearly a need to set examples, to prove that it is possible to move forward. For instance, in the special environmental appropriation aspect of our development assistance, we shall select for support special pilot projects in developing countries designed to meet the requirements of sustainable development. It is hoped that the success of such projects will have an impact when the total allocations for future years are decided upon. If the recipient countries themselves establish priorities based on their assessments of the environmental impacts of the projects, then we will progress beyond the notion of impositions from abroad which seem to be a major concern of many countries.

Sensitivity is important. Many countries agree with the analysis of the report but fear that the real assessments and decisions will be taken by multinational finance institutions, aid agencies, and so on. We should assist these countries through the United Nations Environment Programme, and in other ways, and help them to develop their capacities for assessment against a background of consideration for the environment. If we achieve this we shall have laid the foundation for real international cooperation based on equal partnership.

Reference

Safeguarding tomorrow

If we do not succeed in putting our message of urgency through to today's parents and decision-makers, we risk undermining our children's fundamental right to a healthy, life-enhancing environment. Unless we are able to translate our words into a language that can reach the minds and hearts of people young and old, we shall not be able to undertake the extensive social changes needed to correct the course of development.