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Statsminister
Gro Harlem Brundtland

"OUR COMMON FUTURE" - A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCHES.

Some 40 - 70 000 years ago, humankind, starting to use simple tools, took up its struggle with the biosphere. 200 years ago, with the advent of the industrial revolution, humankind gained the upper hand in that struggle.

In the first half of the 19th century, our advances in terms of power both over other people and over nature itself gained dynamic momentum. The growing global domination by the western world represents another hallmark of that period.

Since early times we have had the capacity to lay waste parts of our habitat. At the start of this century, however, neither human numbers nor human technology had the power to alter planetary systems radically. It was not until we gained access to vast energy resources and put them to use that we acquired the irrevocable power to destroy the biosphere. As this century draws to a close, a greatly increased human population and its activities have that power, and major unintended changes are occurring in the biosphere.

As late as in 1944 we still did not believe that we in fact had the capacity to make this world inhabitable. Since Alamogordo, however, we may never again turn away from the fact that the challenge of controlling our technical capability has become just as important as enhancing it.

Today we are becoming increasingly aware the relationship between development and environment is circular. Development affects the environment, but development itself and the future of our species are dependent upon the environmental resource base. Many development trends have a devastating impact on environment. Such interactions clearly stand out as a major concern, as equally vital as the quest for security and disarmament.

In spite of the affluence and increasing well-being in many countries, the number of people living in absolute poverty is nearing 800 million. The unacceptable gap between the rich and the poor is widening every day. Under the present conditions of development, there is little hope that this gap will be bridged as it must. The need for change has become overwhelmingly obvious.

It is against this historical background I have the great honour to address this meeting in this rather peculiar ecclesiastical setting of Granavollen; the two "sister churches"

bearing witness to the fact that Christianity has deep historic roots in Norway.

The term "sister churches" is also a fitting description of the growth of the international ecumenical movement in this century. Representing a major part of this movement which is called the World Council of Churches, you are indeed part of a rather unique international network. The churches' potential for reaching the grassroots is unsurpassed in many parts of the world.

It is my impression that the churches and the World Commission on Environment and Development today share an understanding that many have lost during the recent centuries of technological development. I have in mind the understanding of humankind's unquestionable interrelatedness with nature, or to use the ecclesiastical term, with creation.

It is my impression that Christian ethics recently have also tended to overlook the relation between human beings and creation. The focus appears to have been concentrated more heavily on the relation between human beings and social structures.

Looking back we see of course Francis of Assisi with his medieval, but still far from outdated, understanding of humankind and nature. Perhaps there are traces of this Franciscan tradition in the ongoing discovery that human beings and nature are dependent on one another.

Your work with these topics, "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" (JPIC), was initiated by the WCC 1983 Assembly in Vancouver, Canada. In that way you also reflect another part of that age-old knowledge that human beings and nature are one: that of the North American Indians, present at the Vancouver Assembly.

In recent years the present Bishop Per Lønning of Bjørgvin has contributed to this process. Until last year he headed a study on theology and ecology at the Lutheran World Federation's Institute of Ecumenical Research, in Strasbourg, France.

With this in mind, let us take a closer look at the present state of the relations between mankind and the earth. We remember the sixties, when global optimism about development prevailed. Growth rates were high in all countries. There were success stories from a number of newly independent states which had gained self-confidence as free nations, and made ambitious leaps to catch up with the industrialized countries economically.

At the end of that decade we saw the heavy impact of the first generation of severe pollution problems. The Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 was met with scepticism from many developing nations. What did the industrialized countries really mean? Was it yet another quest for luxury? Were we, in fact, trying to slow development in the interest of protecting exotic scenery and species? Was

conservation to be achieved at the expense of economic and social development in developing countries? Many of the environmental concerns of the industrialized nations seemed far removed from most of humanity's preoccupation with basic living standards and, in some cases, with survival itself.

In the seventies, we witnessed discussions on the question of actual limits to growth. During that period, North and South seemed to be fighting completely different battles. Frustrations about the inability of our institutions to deal effectively with the most crucial issues were growing. The international conferences on water supply, food, women, human settlements, new and renewable energy sources, and population, offered hope of improved cooperation on major issues. Yet a sense of frustration prevailed. The world was growing smaller, but the gaps between people seemed to be widening.

This was the situation in 1983, when the General Assembly of the United Nations gave the World Commission on Environment and Development its ambitious task. We were asked to take a fresh look at the interrelated issues and to formulate concrete recommendations for action based on shared perceptions of long-term environmental issues.

Our report - "Our Common Future" - is a political document that covers the whole global political agenda. It carries the consensus signature of Commissioners from 21 countries, most of whom come from developing countries. The Commission comprised people with broad experience, not only from environment and development, but also from many vital areas of decision-making which influence economic and social progress. They enriched our deliberations with their cultures, values and ethics. That is why I dare to say that our political consensus rests on a common global cultural denominator.

I shall not repeat the painful list of environmental disasters and grim statistics which have alerted us to the grave crisis facing our planet here. Suffice it to remind us that the atmosphere is a fragile, closed system, not a limitless garbage disposal for by-products of industrialization. Global heating and the threat of climatic change must be countered in a joint determined effort as regards the risks of rising sea-levels and ensuing severe impacts on food-production and settlement patterns. Acidification, hitherto a disease of the rich countries, is also making its impact felt in many newly industrialized areas in the developing world. The loss of tropical rain forests, which continues at an alarming rate, threatens vast numbers of living species and affects the global climate. Over 11 million hectares of forest are destroyed yearly. 6 million hectares of productive dryland are turned into worthless desert each year. Soil erosion is regarded as problem No. 1 by the Food and Agricultural Organization.

Our report sounds an urgent message of warning. We found that present trends and policies cannot continue. They will destroy the resource base on which we all depend. Presently there are few signs that we are about to win our battle against poverty, which continues to tie hundreds of millions to

an existence which cannot be reconciled with human dignity and the need for solidarity. We also found that there can be no question of environment versus development. Environmental degradation and the unequal distribution of wealth and power are in reality different aspects of the same set of problems.

Our second and equally important message is one of hope and optimism. We believe, very strongly, that changes not only are necessary - but they are also possible. Humanity has the knowledge, technology, ingenuity and resources. If we use them correctly, we can adjust the course of development so that it enhances the resource base rather than degrades it. Never before in our history have we had similar capabilities. But for the necessary decisions to be made, we need a new vision, and a stronger political will and determination. We need a new global system of ethics - practical ethics - which can transcend governments, non-governmental organizations, scientific communities, financial institutions, and trade unions, as well as human thinking and behaviour.

Almost ten years ago, as Minister of Environment, I gave a lecture headed "New consideration". It has been interesting to reread what I said on that occasion, including the following cri de coeur:

"The lack of insight into and thus of recognition of the fundamental interconnections between natural processes and social activities may in the future be a serious obstacle to the innovative thinking we shall need if we are to meet the challenges confronting us. The main problem will be to arrive at a planning and decision-making process, a form of society, which takes better account of these considerations. This is true not least in our present economic situation, where we must be especially on guard against the real danger that short-term economic considerations will be advanced at the expense of more fundamental and long-term human needs.

That was in 1978. Today, no one can claim that we lack insight into the interconnections I mentioned then. They are a fact, and they are making us aware that we must plot a new course.

Our main objective is to create such a complete awareness that we can move forward from a phase in which we merely repair damage to a decision-making process in which environmental concerns are integrated into every issue. That objective calls for determined and systematic effort. The goal is distant, but there can be no doubt about which direction we must take.

Our aim was to arrive at viable fundamental principles for the national and international administration of natural resources. Our main message concerns the need to achieve sustainable development.

Sustainable development rests on three main foundations: ecology, economy, and shared responsibility.

If all three pillars are not equally solidly built, the whole platform may collapse.

One of the Commission's main recommendations is that economic and social planning make much greater use of our knowledge of ecology and of the limits nature sets to our exploitation. Ecological and economic facts must be coordinated in effective instruments with which to control long-term national and international developments. Up to now, environmental protection has always been regarded as a special interest, which central economic and industrial decision-makers have not been overly concerned with. Environmental considerations have in far too many cases been looked upon as spanners in otherwise efficient development works. All too frequently, economists and ecologists apply utterly different time-scales in their thinking. There are difficult challenges here to the following up of the Commission's recommendations. Short-term perspectives and sustainable development are not easily combined. Economic yardsticks such as whether Gross National Income is increasing are completely inadequate as indicators of whether or not development is sustainable. In order to set our course towards sustainable development, we must develop better ways of measuring natural resources and the state of the environment, and of gauging trends also in these fields.

For the poorest countries, it is absolutely essential to be given an opportunity to develop on the basis of their own resources. As things are, they are far too dependent on selling their raw materials to industrialized countries - at very low prices. The fact that the poorest countries are being forced to produce crops for export instead of food crops, on increasingly marginal land, ~~to provide the foreign~~ currency they so desperately need, is also completely out of harmony with the concept of sustainable development.

Though our chief aims go beyond merely meeting the primary needs of the world's poorest people, it is the pillar of solidarity beneath the sustainable development platform which is likely to cause most concern in the immediate future. It seems to be extremely difficult to convey the message that cracks in this pillar will have harmful consequences extending far beyond the poorest countries themselves. Poverty and lack of solidarity are contributory causes to desertification, deforestation, loss of genetic resources, and climatic change. Unless there are drastic reforms of the world economy, trade, and international aid, all these serious problems will rapidly grow much worse in the years to come.

The Commission found that economic growth is essential to sustainable development. It is essential if we are to overcome poverty. And it is necessary to creating the capacity to solve environmental problems. But the nature of that growth will have to satisfy new criteria. No doubt this central argument is an important reason why the Commission has been listened to in much wider circles than those which would normally have taken an interest in a traditional environmental report.

During the 1984-85 African famine, the British aid organization OXFAM stated that "It is not the lack of rain which is the problem for the people of Sahel, but the lack of justice". We know that this applies both between industrialized and developing countries, and in most developing countries.

Among the major problems most urgently in need of solving is the debt crisis. For the poorest countries, especially in Africa, there appears to be no alternative to relatively rapid and systematic debt cancellation if production is to be built up and patterns of production changed. It will also be of fundamental importance to find ways of controlling interest rates and achieving stable exchange rates. Particularly for the Latin American countries with the heaviest debt burdens, these questions will determine their ability to go on servicing their debts. That is one more reason why it is necessary to ensure growth in the world economy, as well as cooperation between all concerned to reduce the burden of debt by more direct means.

Many developing countries are increasingly concerned that new conditions relating to the environment, imposed by banks and cooperating countries on planned development projects, will place obstacles in the path to progress. They are opposed to such "green conditionality".

Two aspects need to be stressed in this respect: Firstly, the Commission was emphatic about coupling its demand for higher quality and environmental sensitivity in aid and lending with substantially increased aid flows; and secondly, this integrated process must be made operational by developing ~~countries themselves as part of their national strategies for~~ development. External assistance will be needed to help many countries establish their own capacity to conduct this integration in practice. Such assistance must come at the request of the developing countries concerned and must be assisted by the international community.

In "Our Common Future" the major challenges confronting the world community are discussed in six chapters:

- Population and human resources
- Food security: sustaining the potential
- Species and ecosystems: resources for development
- Energy: choices for environment and development
- Industry: producing more with less
- The urban challenge.

I will discuss some of the items which have attracted the greatest attention internationally.

Population

Careful estimates of population growth conclude that it will be possible to stabilize the world's population at somewhere between 8 and 14 billions some time during the course of the next century. But for stabilization to happen at all, important decisions concerning population policy must be taken now.

Many countries are experiencing a growing disparity between their populations and their resources. This increases the pressure on the environment.

It is evident that all available calculations on the prospects of the people/resource ratio lead to the conclusion that the high increase rates in many countries cannot continue. But we must all recognize that this is a difficult issue - difficult for the individual and difficult for governments. I hope, therefore, that the churches, including the Roman-Catholic Church, will consider the global implications of their expressed views on these issues.

Food production

The impact of agricultural policies is an example of the world-wide interlinkages. The Commission calls for a shift in global agricultural production patterns to where the demand is. The production of enough food to feed a doubled world population is within reach. The real problem now is to secure access to food for those who need it and ensure environmentally sound agricultural practices in all countries.

This is why northern subsidy-driven agricultural production systems must be reconsidered. Much greater resources are needed for promoting sustainable agriculture in the Third World, using techniques adapted to local conditions. The income of the small subsistence farmer must be a common objective.

Energy

Energy is a key sector where progress and the environment are concerned. It is emotionally charged and hotly debated. It will be an enormous challenge to make sufficient energy available for people struggling to break out of the poverty trap. Any use of energy has an environmental price. We must understand that the earth is a closed system, incapable of resisting the increasing pressure from energy consumption on the environment. The challenge for the future will be to arrive at a "basket" of sustainable energy-carriers. The most important target sectors will be to make energy consumption more efficient, and to develop new renewable sources. We in the industrialized countries must strive to stabilize our energy consumption. Large-scale research in renewable energy and the transfer of technology to developing countries are both imperative.

Challenges to industry

Industry has a key part to play in the developments which lie ahead. Creating awareness of industry's role in relation to development will therefore be of tremendous importance, and industry must itself define its responsibility clearly. We have seen industry assume this kind of responsibility often before. I have already mentioned a number of sectors in which industry is mobilizing efforts to develop new technology. Let no one be in the slightest doubt about the growing necessity of developing environmentally acceptable technologies.

The transfer of technology to developing countries is also a big challenge today. Moving chemical industries to low-cost, "flag of convenience" countries lacking environmental standards and control systems is certainly not going to lead to sustainable global development. The welcome given to that type of industry by the governments of some developing countries is not making the problem any easier to solve. They are up against real dilemmas in their wish to exploit their environments to gain competitive advantages. The argument that "we also want to take part in the development of industrialized and welfare societies, even if it does cost a little" will not do in a long term perspective. Admittedly it is the industrialized countries which produce 98% of the roughly 375 million tons of today's dangerous industrial waste, so that distributing production among more countries may in itself seem sensible. But the recovery, control and safe storage of such waste must satisfy the same strict requirements wherever it is produced. In the last analysis, what is at risk is nature's productive capacity and human lives and health.

Genetic resources

The protection of plants and animals has often been regarded as an obstacle to development, as academic museum activity for tender-hearted people with too much leisure. And so it may be for some - but that is not the question here. What we are concerned with is the preservation of the genetic resources on which our lives are based. They are the real non-renewable resources. However clever we may become at biotechnology or gene splicing, genetic materials once lost are gone forever. The Commission accordingly stressed this in its report.

We need not achieve everything at once

To sceptics, of whom there are always plenty, I would say that no one has claimed that we can solve all the problems at once. A counsel of perfection should not blind us to what can be achieved. Nor should the want of omnipotence be reason to abstain from such options as are available.

If we are to reach the goals of sustainable development, virtually every one of the challenges I have referred to must be dealt with through both national and international efforts.

The various agencies of the United Nations will be playing central parts in the work of following up the report. To facilitate coordinations among the UN agencies, the Norwegian Government, following consultations with the Secretary General of the United Nations and with his cooperation, has decided to invite the Heads of many important agencies to a special conference in Norway in July.

Other international organizations can also help to prevent the World Commission's report from gathering dust in bureaucratic

archives. Many important NGOs will be in the forefront of a broad supporting campaign.

The role of NGOs is central. The Commission is itself an NGO. Though coming from many different nations and disciplines and bearing different national and international responsibilities, the commissioners hammered out over three years a unanimous document. It is evident how closely our findings match the vision of many of the world's NGOs, both the ones traditionally concerned with environment and development, and the ones who primarily have another foundation.

Our report does not lay direct blame at the door of any government and institution. It has been criticized for not naming names. We are confident that that is a job we may leave to the world's NGOs.

This leads me to another important role of the NGOs. One of the main themes of our report is that sustainable development cannot be achieved without a political system that secures citizen's effective participation in decision-making. NGOs are essential for this fundamental process. Thus we have called upon governments to recognize and extend NGOs' right to know and to have access to information. It is a hall-mark of mature democracy that they be consulted and participate in decisions about activities that have an effect on their environment.

In the report we stress the need for basic education. Education should be geared towards making people more capable of dealing with local environmental problems as well as towards raising their understanding about the interdependence between the environment and development. The churches are deeply involved with the education of future generations all over the world. You have the opportunity to provide direction and motivation in forming values about our common responsibility for the environment and for social justice. I hope that "Our Common Future" could provide substance and inspiration, both when you in your teachers' training, and when you when you consider the curricula of your schools.

Public concern puts environment and development issues onto the national and international agendas. NGOs have helped to create awareness and to communicate the growing concern over environment and development issues to decision-makers.

The World Council of Churches is also an NGO. Your objective is the future of humankind, a common future, and it is tempting to say, our common future. It transcends the the gospel that there is hope, and that we have been given a responsibility to manage and care for each other and for the earth.

In relation to environment and development issues the churches has the power to influence our motives, and ultimately our actions. Your values are eternal, but they can be applied to current human and political challenges. What could be more becoming of the churches than to show

ethical leadership and work for sustainable development also at the practical level.

So what is the WCED's challenge to the churches? First and foremost: help us convince all those who fear the future that there is hope. We do not have to head towards imminent ecological disaster. We can find another path, that of a healthy and sustainable common future.

The Christian faith holds a basic hope. This hope concerns not only the churches, but the earth and humankind as a whole. We can join hands for "Our Common Future".

The follow-up work will require untraditional thinking. This is a time to try to deepen our understanding of the changes taking place, to look ahead, and to assess what needs to be done if we are to stay in control of our own future. Developments in science and social organization are altering the world profoundly - too profoundly for conventional habits of thinking to grasp. History suggests that mankind rarely understands revolutionary changes at the time it is coming about. Today's and tomorrow's revolutionary changes are characterized by their great magnitude and speed. Their impact is both centrifugal and centripetal, dispersing, yet at the same time concentrating activities, influences and decisions.

If we do not succeed in reaching the hearts and minds of people, young and old, in this period of change, our chances in the future will be less. Voluntary organizations, industry, trade unions, and research environments are called upon to play essential roles in this process. Women will have to have much more of a hearing, not only because of their roles in practical natural husbandry, especially in developing countries, but also because of their influence both on product selection and on local environments.

The World Commission's report can - and should - have great consequences. We can not allow the threats and warnings, or the optimistic ventures that will be needed to alter developments, to be forgotten. Politicians and scientists, the commercial sector and the voluntary organizations: all share a common responsibility. This subject should engage this audience, too, with its perspectives, possibilities, traditions and great influence.