



WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

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OPENING ADDRESS

by

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ON THE OCCASION OF THE LAUNCH OF THE REPORT

'OUR COMMON FUTURE'

London, Monday, 27 April 1987

Why have so many of us, from different nations and different generations, gathered before you today? It is to make the world aware that humanity has come to a crossroad.

When the century began, neither human numbers nor human technology had the power radically to alter planetary systems. As the century closes, not only do vastly increased human numbers and activities have that power, but major, unintended changes are occurring in the atmosphere, in soils, in waters, among plants and animals, and in the relationships among all of these. These changes outstrip our present ability to cope; our financial and political institutions are out of step with the workings of nature.

This morning we release our report on these vital issues. 'Our Common Future' is not a scientific report; it is not just a book about environment and development, written by environmentalists or economists. It should not be read as such. It is instead the result of a broad political process of analysis, learning, and debate. It is a unanimous report. And above all a political document. It was formulated by people with different backgrounds and experience, with a broad range of national and international responsibilities. I believe that its greatest strength lies in the process which formed it. As we worked, nationalism and the artificial divides between industrialized and developing nations, between East and West, receded. In their place emerged a common concern for the planet and the interlocking ecological and economic threats with which its people, institutions, and governments grapple.

'Our Common Future' should be taken seriously for its new insights into environment and economics, but even more so for its analysis of the ways in which policies and practices can and must change to match present and future realities. We offer this consensus as one upon which the international community can and must build.

Our unanimity arose not just from discussions among ourselves, but from our public hearings on five continents. We listened in various ways to thousands of people. The evidence of the scientists persuaded us of the inescapable reality of the global environmental problems you have just seen dramatized on the screen. But the human mind and spirit have difficulty grasping the reality of such environmental destruction. I know that we on the Commission were more deeply moved by the testimony of the many ordinary citizens: farmers, herders, fishermen, city-dwellers. It was they who convinced us of the human costs of this destruction, of how it impoverishes them, how it limits their potential to build their societies and nations, and how it robs their children of the means to prosper - in some cases to survive. Families sense the unity of their own local environment; they know it cannot be divided politically, or into separate sectors and systems. The same unity is true for the global environment.

The seventies asked the question of limits to growth. We entered an era when environment and economic growth were perceived as plainly contradictory, and North and South seemed to be fighting completely different battles.

Today, we on the Commission call for a new era of economic growth, with a content that enhances the resource base rather than degrades it. We know now that new and sustainable growth does not need to be environmentally degrading; that growth, in fact, can create the capacity to solve environmental problems; that growth is the only way that mass poverty can be overcome.

And without growth, how can we provide for twice the present population some time in the next century, when we cannot provide for everybody today?

The world population will grow to at least 8 to 10 billion in the next century. But it might increase by billions more, and all would suffer the consequences, if we do not realize in time that our own future requires a reorientation of policy in the developed and developing world alike. Only in a world that is safer, one which gives the poor more self-respect and hope for their lives and future, will poor people have real choices, including the choice to limit the size of their families.

We in the industrialized world have to accept an obligation to ensure that international economic relations help rather than hinder the possibilities for ecologically sound and sustainable development. It is our duty, but it is also in our own self-interest. Commodity prices must be influenced to provide a fair international distribution of income. Official development assistance and private loans and investments to developing countries have to be improved - both qualitatively and quantitatively. Increased capital transfers are absolutely necessary in a world ridden by debt crisis, and they must take place in ways that are sensitive to environmental impacts and contribute to long-term sustainability. Policies will have to be changed accordingly, both nationally and internationally.

In looking at global food security, a complex web of unsustainability results in record harvests at the same time that record numbers of people go hungry and malnourished. Northern agricultural production systems, often driven by short-sighted and contradictory subsidies, over-exploit farmland and introduce harmful chemicals into foods and water, but they also produce surpluses expensive to store. Much of this surplus goes to developing nations in ways that undermine their own food production there. Our recommendations in this field involve reorienting policies to shift the centres of production to food-deficit areas, to give systematic attention to the renewal of natural resources, and to change the agricultural terms of trade so that they favour local farmers.

Energy is another area of vital importance. Sustainable development recognizes that developing nations will require more, not less, total energy. Their industrialization and rapidly growing populations depend on this. But even the

the International Monetary Fund, and of the entire United Nations system. It must also be the linch-pin of national energy, industrial, and trade policies. Foreign policies must be based as much on the permanent realities of an interdependent global environment as on the more transient interdependent political and economic alignments of nations.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, when I presented the report to him last week, said that it would provide important guidance for the future.

We offer governments and international institutions a challenging agenda for change. After a decade and a half of standstill and even deterioration in global cooperation, the time has come for higher aspirations, for increased political will to address our common future. The United Nations system with all of its specialized agencies offers an extensive institutional capacity to reach our common goals. We call for a fundamental commitment by all governments and institutions to transform this report into a United Nations Programme of Action on Sustainable Development, to be followed by an international conference to set benchmarks, to assess progress, and to promote follow-up.

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Our generation is the first to have seen its own planet from a distance, as indeed we have seen just now on the video screen. The impact of this vision on human thinking may surpass the 16th century discovery that the Earth is not the centre of the universe. We see a tiny, fragile globe floating in space. And we realize that it is upon this closed, vulnerable system that we all depend.

Our report offers, as I have said, a challenging agenda. But it is not a final blueprint. Such a blueprint was never our goal. We were asked to offer strategies and motivation for adopting new policies. In demonstrating the real threats to both our present and our future, and showing that workable solutions are at hand, our report offers that motivation. We hope that it will achieve its purpose of generating the debate and discussion which can revitalize international cooperation. New dimensions of multilateralism are essential to sustainable human progress.

I want very much to thank all of those who made this report possible. I remember doubting three years ago that any group could fulfil the ambitious mandate set for this Commission. It was only after I started to work with my fellow Commissioners, when I sensed their dedication and benefited from their knowledge and enthusiasm, that I became convinced that we could produce the agenda for action and change that had been so urgently called for.

The process that produced this unanimous report proved that it is possible to join forces, to identify common goals, and to agree on common action.

## PRESENTATION TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE

Our report and its recommendations are founded upon the aspiration and insights of the thousands of people we met during our public hearings. Many of these people were young. Our task was to provide a framework of action into the 21st century, and we were specifically mandated to seek the views of youth. We have therefore decided to offer 'Our Common Future' to the world in a manner appropriate to our task and our mandate. I would like to offer it to, and through, 12 young people, all of whom have participated in the work of the Commission in their own nations.

Let no one misinterpret this gesture. We politicians and policy-makers of today are not dodging a difficult chore by passing it along to the next generation. Human well-being and survival will depend on decisions taken by us, today.

But I now place this report into the hands of these young people, who will present it to their governments back home. Securing our common future will require new energy and openness, fresh insights, and an ability to look beyond the narrow bounds of national frontiers and separate scientific disciplines. The young are better at such vision than we, who are too often constrained by the traditions of a former, more fragmented world. We must tap their energy, their openness, their ability to see the interdependence of issues. Their energy must also be tapped to spread this message. The young are more frank, more outspoken. Already organizations of young people around the world are planning rallies, conferences, and teach-ins to respond to this report.

We ask that they continue to monitor our actions, comment upon our progress, and inform our consciences. Our generation has too often been willing to use the resources of the future to meet our own short-term goals. It is a debt that we can never repay. If we fail to change our ways, these young men and women will suffer more than we, and they and their children will be denied their fundamental right to a healthy, productive, life-enhancing environment.