

Genève

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Dear Friends,

It is not my intention to make a formal speech to you here today. This I have already made in the World Health Assembly, a speech which is available to all of you who would like to see it. I also had the pleasure to address one of the organizations based here, the World Council of Churches, at a meeting held in Norway only a couple of months ago.

But I am pleased to have this opportunity to meet you all here in your own working environment, and particularly so because I consider that we are partners and collaborators, working and struggling for many common causes and towards many common goals. I also know that the Church of Norway has been an active member, both in the World Council and in the Lutheran World Federation since they were founded forty years ago.

I am here first and foremost as Chairman of the World Commission on Environment and Development, a group of 21 dedicated and highly qualified persons from all parts of the world who came forward with their unified message in "Our Common Future" after nearly three years of work. The key sentence in our message is that of "sustainable development" which we have defined as meeting the needs and aspirations of the present generations without compromising the possibilities of those of the future. It is a broad programme for an economic and social progress that enhances the resource base and improves the environment instead of degrading it. To succeed it requires a more equitable distribution of wealth within and among nations, and an eradication of mass poverty and need. We all know that it requires solidarity and even compassion in its implementation.

Here our goals and objectives converge with those of the churches and many other idealistic organizations of the world.

We in the Commission have underlined humanity's close interrelatedness with nature. In the church you would maybe use the expression: close interrelatedness with creation. I suppose we agree, in line with Christian thinking, that we have all been given a responsibility, a responsibility to care for each other and in so doing managing wisely the earth entrusted to us. Our common objective is the future of humanity, a future which is more just and more human. Your values in the churches can and should be applied to current human and political challenges, so that we can support each other towards the goals of "Our Common Future".

Maybe sometimes we are all overtaken by pessimism. The challenges are so great and progress so slow. There are presently few signs that we are about to win the battle against poverty which continues to tie hundreds of millions to an existence below human dignity. And poverty is, as we soon saw it in our Commission, both the main cause for and main result of environmental degradation. There can thus be no question of environment versus development. They are in fact two aspects of the same set of problems.

However, and this should be the great encouragement: We have today the possibilities to make changes. The knowledge, technology and resources are there. This is the great difference from the past. Today we have the possibility to start a new development where the environment is an ally, not a victim of our actions.

We have the possibilities to meet the basic needs of all, to eradicate hunger and eliminate illiteracy. But for the necessary decisions to be made we need a new vision and a stronger political will and determination. And we need a strengthened basis of ethics which can influence governments and decision-making all over the world.

We need governments imbued with a moral vocation which goes beyond the pursuance of short-term and narrow-minded national interests, governments who can see and recognize that the world is indivisible and humanity is one. In this process the personal engagement of individuals and of NGOs are needed more than ever.

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 in your teachers' training, and in the curricula of your schools.

What is required are new ways of thinking - new conceptual tools. We need to realize that the frontiers of the nation state offer very little protection to a global environment that knows no boundaries. While concrete action is needed now, we must also prepare the coming generations for the challenges they will meet.

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.

International church organizations are also NGOs. Your objective is the future of humankind, a common future, and it is tempting to say, our common future. This objective has arisen from 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.

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.

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 key player in this process. And women will have to have much more of a hearing.

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.

I am not sure whether it is good theology, but I would think it is in line with the best of Christian and humanistic ethics the sentence which was framed by a famous poet from my own country of the last century, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, reading as follows: The good deeds save the world. (De gode gjerninger redder verden.)