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Chairman of the World Commission on Environment and Development.

"OUR COMMON FUTURE" - SPEECH TO THE 41ST WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY.

Mr. President,
Mr. Director General,
Excellencies,
Distinguished representatives.

Last year the world's population passed the 5 billion mark. We don't know where or when world citizen No.5 billion was born. Most likely it was in a developing country, and the family's joy will have been mixed with concern for how they should be able to provide for their new child and protect it against disease and early death.

In the next century, this finite earth, which today is ridden by poverty, environmental decline and growing inequalities, will be required to sustain a world population of 10 billion. 90 % of this population growth will take place in developing countries. This finite earth may be required to sustain a world economy five to ten times as large as the present one. It is quite clear that a continuation of present patterns is not the solution to the challenges we face.

How are we going to provide food and energy for a doubled world population in the face of increasing soil erosion, deforestation, desertification, acidification and the threat of climatic change?

How are we going to provide education, when our capacity is highly inadequate even today?

And how are we going to provide water, sanitation and health services for all, when our present rate of expansion hardly keeps up with world population growth?

We are going through a period which demands profound changes. When this century began, neither human numbers nor technology had the power radically to alter planetary systems. As this century draws to a close, we have that power, and major, unintended changes are occurring in the biosphere.

Due to a prevailing sense of endemic inadequacy and ebb in multilateral cooperation, the World Commission on Environment and Development was established by the United Nations in 1983. We were asked to take a fresh look at the interrelated issues of environment and development and to formulate concrete

recommendations for action based on shared perceptions of long-term environmental issues.

The Commission's report, "Our Common Future", was issued one year ago. It is a document of political consensus prepared by people from 21 countries, - people with different backgrounds and varied experience, most of which came from developing countries - to reflect the real world. It is a consensus on which the international community can build.

It is a particular honour and pleasure to address this 41st World Health Assembly. I want to congratulate you, Mr. President, on your election as president of this Assembly, and to congratulate the WHO on its 40th anniversary. The WHO has played, and will continue to play, a vital role in the creation of a world which offers more hope and which is more secure for all.

Under the highly respected and competent leadership of Dr. Mahler, the WHO has achieved remarkable success, not least over the past decade. The adoption of the strategy and the goal of Health for All was an event of major importance in this respect. Much greater resources will have to be mobilized world wide if we are to attain Health for All, for the benefit of all people, and the planet as a whole.

"Our Common Future" sounds an urgent warning as ominous clouds gather. Present trends and policies cannot continue. They will destroy the resource base on which we all depend. And they will continue to tie hundreds of millions of people to an existence which cannot be reconciled with human dignity and the need for solidarity.

However, our second and equally important message is one of hope and optimism. While the Commission emphatically warns that changes must be made if disastrous mistakes with global ramifications are to be avoided, we also believe that it is possible to make the changes which are so urgently needed. We point to the fact that human resources, knowledge and capabilities have never been greater, and that it is possible to create a future which is more prosperous, more just and more secure.

The overriding political concept upon which our report is founded is that of sustainable development. It is a broad concept for social and economic progress. We define it as paths of human progress which meet the needs and aspirations of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. It requires a fairer distribution of wealth within and among nations. It requires political reforms, fair access to knowledge and resources, and real participation in decision-making.

We recognize that there are thresholds imposed by nature, but not limits to economic growth. On the contrary, forceful economic growth is the only feasible weapon in the fight against poverty and squalor. And only growth can create the capacity to solve environmental and health problems.

However, the contents of growth must be changed. Growth cannot be based on overexploitation of the resources of Third World countries. Growth must be managed to enhance the resource base on which we all depend. The environment and the natural resources must cease to be victims in a world economy troubled by serious imbalances, and become our allies in the struggle to restore the planet's natural equilibrium.

But for this to happen, fundamental changes in the international economy are called for. The industrialized countries will have a great responsibility to ensure that the world economy enhances rather than hinders the potential for sustainable development.

The decade of the 1980s has, however, witnessed the discontinuity and severe reversal of earlier more hopeful trends in global growth performance. Sharp deterioration in the international economic environment has played by far the greatest role in triggering the acute crisis which now afflicts the Third World.

Indicators of this critical situation are unsustainable, crushing burdens of external debt; a substantial decline in export earnings due to acutely depressed commodity prices and increasing protectionism, steeply declining flows of resource transfers; and chronic instability of the international currency market, and the abnormally high levels of real interest rates.

In this harsh reality, developing countries have little alternative but to tax their natural resources, often beyond the limits of recovery, to get funds for servicing foreign debts, and to try to maintain necessary imports. It is absurd that developing countries are transferring more to the industrialized countries than they receive.

These trends will have to be reversed, not only because the situation is in itself unacceptable, but also because it is in the self interest of the developed countries themselves. It is urgent that development aid, and lending must be increased, and they must be sensitized to the carrying capacities of the recipient countries. But the overriding goal must be to forge an economic partnership based on equitable trade.

The experience of many developing countries trying to break out of the economic deadlocks are certainly mixed. This has often included external pressure for budget cuts, resulting in axed environmental programmes and weakening of health and social programmes. Very often the poorest and the weakest have been victimized by prescriptions for adjustment.

We note and appreciate the increasing willingness of the World Bank in particular to address these issues in a real dialogue with developing countries.

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

- Population and human resources

- Food security
- Species and ecosystems
- Energy
- Industry, and
- The urban challenge.

Recently I was asked why health was not one of these issues. My reply is: Ultimately, the entire report is about health. Why should we deal so extensively with nuclear energy if it were not for the potential damage to health? Why should we be concerned about toxic wastes if they were not damaging to human well-being? Why should we devote a chapter to food security if human health and well-being were not the clear objective?

Truly there have been many successes in the field of health, and there are many indications that human health is improving: Infant mortality is falling, life expectancy is increasing, literacy is increasing in relative terms, and global food production is increasing faster than population growth, although not in all parts of the world. Smallpox has been eradicated, thanks to the WHO. And you have high ambitions, as expressed, for example; in Talloires, France, one month ago. Universal immunization may be a dream come true, and funds for its realization must be made available.

However, unless we succeed in developing the full potential of human resources and launch a victorious battle against vaccine-preventable diseases, and improve education, water and sanitation in all parts of the world, our visions of a better future will not come true. Stronger inter-agency cooperation and coordination will be required to reach that goal.

Many other challenges lie ahead. The AIDS problem is one which presently frighten millions of people. The WHO has taken a most timely and vital initiative through the General Programme on AIDS. Governments must overcome any inhibition in addressing this problem in a realistic and responsible manner.

Over the past decade the WHO has been engaged in a multilateral, multisectorial process of reorientation, through the Health for All strategy, and WHO's concern for environmental policies, which will provide humans with a health-promoting habitat, dates back even further.

Where population is growing by more than 3 per cent, however, it is difficult to see how a distasteful cycle of declining living standards and a deteriorating environment can be averted. The interrelationship between population growth and social and economic development, equity and the development of women's resources is well known to this Assembly. The right of families to have access to advice and services which will enable them to choose the number and birth intervals of their children, is accepted by us all as a basic human right. That right needs to become much more real in practice.

Poverty, population growth, inadequate development of human resources and insufficient services are linked in a vicious circle in too many parts of the world. Tribal and indigenous

groups, as well as vulnerable socio-economic and religious groups, will need especially and careful attention. The WHO has taken a great interest in this area, as evidenced by its special programmes on Human Reproduction and on Family Health.

Population is not a question of numbers alone, but also of consumption patterns. Many countries will have to vigorously implement population policies which must comprise social and economic factors.

We are all united in a long-term commitment toward working for basic health service as a fundamental human right. The 30th World Health Assembly resolved to work for health in concrete operational terms: by the year 2000, all citizens of the world should have attained a level of health that will permit them to lead socially and economically productive lives.

At the same time inequity is increasing, and the absolute numbers of hungry, illiterate and homeless people are growing. There are also signs indicating that certain infectious diseases which have been under control, such as malaria, trypanosomiasis, are increasing as a result of increasing poverty and inability to meet basic needs. In this context I emphasize the importance of the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, to which the Norwegian Government has given strong support since its initiation.

The realization of HFA is inconceivable without

- strong political commitment,
- strong public support,
- full attention to conservation of resources and protection of the eco-system for the sustained satisfaction of basic needs on a basis of equity and responsibility,
- full support from the health services which must be reoriented to build on primary health care as outlined in the Alma Ata Declaration,

A number of resolutions from this Assembly further elaborate these issues and encourage action. The recommendations of the Adelaide Conference on Healthy Public Policy further emphasize the relationship between social, environmental and economic policies and health.

Malnutrition is a serious obstacle to health and to the development of human resources. Global agriculture has the potential to provide enough food for us all, but food is often not available where it is needed. Women food producers and other small food growers have not been recognized as farmers and have been neglected and pushed onto marginal land, thus causing further deterioration of an environment already under stress.

Industrialized food production has created surpluses for which there is no purchasing power on the hungry markets in economically deprived countries. Ecologically and economically sound farming practices need to be developed and promoted in all

areas of the world. To this end effective incentive systems are needed to promote local food production by small farmers, the majority of whom are women. The question of food security is intimately related to questions of local availability and local purchasing power.

The future will largely be an urban one. By the turn of the century almost half of humanity will live in urban centres. A failure to manage the urban infrastructure will lead to further mushrooming of settlements having insufficient access to essential facilities such as clean water, sanitation, food supplies, transport systems, education, health care and other public services, with overcrowding and with a disease pattern linked to poverty and an unhealthy environment.

It will require courage, determination and political commitment to slow and turn the urbanization process. It will be necessary to maintain a process of regional development which will promote the growth of viable, smaller settlements outside the cities. It will also be necessary to promote the development of healthy cities in which the resources of the inhabitants are mobilized and released in decentralized, autonomous, local development strategies.

Emerging technologies offer the promise of higher productivity, increased efficiency, and decreased pollution, but many bring risks of new toxic chemicals and wastes, and major accidents of such type and scale that present coping mechanisms are unable to deal with them. In the future industries will have to be more environmentally benign. The first line of defence will lie with industry itself which must recognize its clear responsibility.

It is evident from what I have said that economic development issues cannot be separated from environment or health issues. A revival of the multilateral approach to solving problems is essential. We all need to recognize that it is in our mutual interest to chart a new course of action.

Our analysis is clear. Environment is not a separate sector, distinct from key economic sectors such as industry, agriculture and energy, or from other sectors having profound effects on human health and well-being. Environmental concerns will have to become an integral part of decision-making at all levels. This will further have implications for all international organizations responsible for trade, aid, and technological and financial assistance.

The strategy for achieving sustainable development has many parallels to the HFA strategy. We need political commitment which can best be developed and sustained through strong public support. The World Commission on Environment and Development is addressing governments, industry, trade unions, NGOs, the scientific community, and, of course, individual people. It is the health and well-being of people which is the ultimate goal of all environment and development policies.

We need plans of action for sustainable development and

a set of clearly defined targets, and we need a monitoring and evaluation system which will enable decision-makers and the people to monitor progress and which will help make politicians accountable to their electorat. Public accountability is essential for the rapid development of sustainable health and environmental policies. Much can be achieved by building on the common framework for monitoring and evaluation established in support of the Health for All Strategy. I look forward to close cooperation in this matter between the WHO, UNEP and the entire UN system.

The health services play a major role in providing and promoting information concerning the effects of socio-economic development and environmental conditions on health, and concerning the way such development affects equity.

The role of the WHO in collecting and analyzing such information and making it available to the UN Family, to national decision-makers and to the public, cannot be overestimated. Epidemiological data are also required in the process of developing adequate environmental standards.

The Commission on Environment and Development has completed its work. But the work towards sustainable development must go on. We appreciate the draft resolution recommended by the Executive Board in January. The WHO is the first specialized agency of the United Nations to take concrete steps in response to the General Assembly's call for a follow up of "Our Common Future".

The World Commission calls for a common endeavour and for new norms of behaviour at all levels. This is a challenge we must take, - and take in the spirit so well expressed by Dr. Mahler, - the spirit of knowledge and motivation!