

Prime Minister
Gro Harlem Brundtland

DINNER SPEECH - INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION ON PEACE AND FOOD,
OSLO, 31 AUGUST 1992.

Dear Dr. Swaminathan,
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am glad to have this opportunity to meet so many old friends and hopefully to make new ones. Dr. Swaminathan belongs to the former category. His background and chairmanship of this Commission is an example of how the special working methods developed by various independent commissions can be of benefit to others.

Dr. Swaminathan was the natural choice as Chairman when the World Commission on Environment and Development decided to establish an advisory panel on food. The panel report to the Commission - "Food 2000" - provided an invaluable background for our own deliberations.

Similar earlier experience was decisive for my own decision to accept the call from the Secretary-General of the UN to establish and chair the World Commission on Environment and Development. I had been fortunate to serve on the Palme Commission on peace and disarmament, and had already experienced people from different backgrounds working together and how they managed, eventually, to hammer out a consensus, even such consensus at times seemed impossible.

Previous independent Commissions were at work during that parts of the 1980s when international cooperation was at a historically low ebb. Introvert attitudes, antagonism and mighty belief in liberalism in major Western countries, and the latter period of Soviet gerontocracy were on opposite sides of a seemingly insurmountable ideological divide.

Fresh ideas were rare in the realm of traditional diplomacy. But the independent Commission provided an outlet for responsible people. However, the counter-forces facing Brandt, Palme and the World Commission seemed too strong.

Today, "common security" as defined by the Palme Commission is accepted even in military circles. "Sustainable development" as defined by the World Commission has become a well established, accepted concept.

The "Earth Summit" in Rio this summer marked both the end and the beginning of a process long called for by the World Commission.

The road from Rio will be critical. Burdensharing will remain essential. There are several bills that need to be covered in an unruly, troubled world. Bills for peace-keeping, refugee relief, famine and natural disaster.

The environmental threats and poverty, however, are cross-cutting, long-term, predictable and unavoidable unless we make substantial progress regarding burdensharing, and succeed in developing stronger common perceptions and a stronger sense of common responsibility.

Your basic documents, and your contribution to the Rio Conference emphasize how education and dissemination of knowledge are decisive for development and eradication of poverty. And this need for enhanced education in my view not only applies to the South.

We in the North will face political difficulty doing what is required unless the people of our countries understand the importance of what we are doing and that it is in our own self-interest.

It is a deplorable fact that in this world, in spite of what we know today, that industrialized countries can go to Rio, speak eloquently about poverty and environment and still withhold financial assistance.

While many countries announced increases or changes in their foreign aid in Rio, the overall picture is embarrassing.

As you know, Norway is on the top of the list of international donors in per capita terms. There are comfortable and less comfortable aspects about such a position.

It indicates that by international standards, our country is not doing too badly. But it also tells us that the distance between such donors as the Nordic countries and the Netherlands on the one hand and other donors on the other has not been significantly narrowed.

We have been encouraged by friends in many developing countries to make a strong point of our level of assistance in the United Nations and other fora. We have been asked to do this in order to apply pressure on other countries that could actually do more. So far, however, we are disappointed by the effects of this kind of pressure.

The facts remains that foreign aid has to be supported by the electorates in the respective countries. In essence, foreign aid is really about democracy. People are quick to turn against political leaders if they fail to understand that burdens have a necessary purpose.

It is necessary therefore that all segments of our societies become more deeply involved in the real issues of our time.

Education and information are crucial in this respect.

Democracy cannot be achieved by top-down processes. It must have its basis in our communities, in the minds and priorities of the individual citizen and voter, in political parties and in the network of interest groups and non-governmental organizations that are an essential part of our pluralistic societies.

Opponents of foreign aid have described it as financial transfers from the poor people in the rich countries to the rich people in the poor countries. And truly, many people in the North do not feel that the word "rich" aptly describes their life situation. They pay their mortgages, they hope to be able to support their children through school and give them a decent start in life. An increasing number of them are unemployed.

Many will give generously when there is a spectacular famine or disaster somewhere in the world, and will contribute to varying degrees to their governments' international assistance programmes through taxes and duties without objection.

But we should not hide the fact that foreign aid has been under attack and that there have been failures as well as successes in the history of foreign aid.

The Interaction Council touched a on sensitive issue when they earlier this year proposed a limit on military expenditure for countries requesting foreign aid.

This, of course, is a dilemma because the military spending of a specific government could actually hurt the poorer segments of the population who has no influence on their government's budgets.

All in all, I believe that a stronger element of political dialogue must be introduced between donor and recipient countries. Issues such as military spending, the state of democracy, human rights and the existence of real redistributive systems are likely to influence the political support for foreign aid in donor countries.

Donors are likely to weigh the prospects of political reform in recipient countries carefully. Many developing countries have embarked on major reform programmes. In the future, I believe that systems of land reform, food security policies, population policies and improved educational systems will be rewarded by the international community.

Thus, we need to continue to monitor the quality of aid and reform. In order to focus on the right issues, we need independent bodies to act as a global conscience and to speak up should established mechanisms and organizations fail to do their job.

Thus, international cooperation depends upon the blood-transfusions that independent Commissions from time to time can provide. I wish the International Commission on Peace and Food success in its important endeavour. We will be looking forward to receiving your report.

We in Norway are eager to keep close contacts with this Commission as it proceeds with its challenging mandate. I propose a toast to you, Dr, Swaminathan, to the members and supporters of the Commission and I wish you a fruitful stay in our country.