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An event without parallel will open in Rio de Janeiro six weeks from now. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, or UNCED as it is called in diplomatic jargon, will consider the most fundamental issue facing the world community today: How to reconcile human activities with the laws of nature.

While it was the United Nations itself which called this conference, its midwife was an independent Commission which set out in 1984 to formulate nothing less than a global agenda for change.

This Commission, The World Commission on Environment and Development was established by a UN General Assembly decision. The Secretary-General of the United Nations called upon me, at my office in the Norwegian Parliament one December day in 1983 to establish and chair this new Commission. This was a call not entirely without consequence.

Together with vice-chairman Mansour Khalid, former foreign minister of the Sudan, I established a group of 22 commissioners from all regions of the world with a majority coming from developing countries to reflect global realities.

The World Commission worked for three years, listening to advice from top scientific experts as well as to poor farmers in developing countries. We listened to governments, non-governmental organizations, trade unions, womens organizations and to youth.

Our report was issued here in London on the 27th of April 1987. We named it "Our Common Future" to capture what we came to realize; Whether we live in affluence in an industrialized country or whether we belong to the 1,2 billion people who live in absolute poverty, we are all neighbours in an interlinked world. We have no other option than to cooperate with each other to overcome all those dangerous trends that threaten the human race and its natural environment.

We coined the concept of "sustainable development" to capture the directions we have to pursue if we shall avoid suffocating from pollution, reversing depletions of the earths forests and

its myriads of living species, contaminating water and land resources.

We pointed to how we should bring the uses of energy into line with what nature can tolerate and to how we should ensure that enough food is available for an expanding world population.

We found that these imperatives could not be achieved as long as poverty is endemic. We found that it is not only a moral imperative, but enlightened self interest to bring more equity into this world.

We were unanimous in focusing on the international economy as a force multiplier that needed major change. We found a desperate need for a more equitable distribution of wealth and opportunity, both between countries as well as within countries. We found the only sane policy to be one of international burdensharing between rich and poor countries, in which debt relief, development assistance, transfer of environmentally sound technology as well as a general climate conducive to investment were key components.

Our Common Future is not laden with doom. On the contrary we became convinced that we have the potential and the capacity to change towards sustainable development. But for this to happen we need to realize humankind's full potential. This potential cannot be realized without global democracy, in which people have real rights to participate in decision-making processes. We must shift resources from arming our people towards educating them and providing health services and more equal opportunities for all.

In presenting our report to the global community, we proposed that an international conference should be convened to review progress towards sustainable development and to provide for coordinated and consistent follow up of the Commissions recommendations. That Conference, UNCED, is in June, in Rio.

Five years have passed since the report was released. Since then East-West antagonism has virtually vanished and the climate for international cooperation is stunningly changed to the better. Ideological deadlocks are losing their grips, and democracy is gaining ground in all corners of the globe.

The opportunity to address common challenges about future survival is better than ever before. A changing world is getting ready for Rio.

Preparations for the Conference have been conducted in four meetings of the special Preparatory Committee, and the UNCED Secretary-General is also a member of the Commission, Mr. Maurice Strong from Canada.

A little more than a year ago, Maurice Strong suggested to me that the World Commission, which has not met since it concluded its work in 1987, should be reconvened in order to assess the situation since we released our report and to offer

our advice to the Rio Conference.

The Commission saw an opportunity and felt an obligation to build on our experience and to express ourselves on the issues. This is the background for our three-day meeting in London.

In addition to the members of the Commission we have invited five people with profound experience in international affairs to join us to enrich our deliberations. They are the former Foreign Minister of China Huang Hua, former presidents Miguel de la Madrid of Mexico, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, former Director of the London School of Economics Dr. I.G.Patel, and former Prime Minister of France Michel Rocard. I am grateful that they all have accepted our invitations.

One of the most famous and effective pieces of public communication I have seen is a British poster showing a young boy asking his father: "What did you do in the war, daddy?" It was conceived at a time when the freedom and future of Britain were challenged. The history of that challenge was guided, not by technical and organizational skills alone, but by the moral conviction and compassion of men and women who each made individual contributions over and beyond the call of duty to safeguard their freedom and the future of their children.

Today, the threats to our future come not so much from military aggression, as from our own way of living, from tacit acceptance that poverty and destitution are facts of life, and from shortsighted abuse of resources. We may have to face the next generations inquiry into what we did when we realized what was at stake.

The hole in the ozone-layer will give some of us skin-cancer, but it is our human nature to close our eyes to this fact and to hope that individually we may be spared. But the odds are beginning to mount against our children and grand-children. And if global warming remains unchecked, food-production may suffer, and droughts, storms and floods may upset our delicate production and transport systems. Island states may disappear and hundreds of millions of people living in low-lying areas will be affected. This all may happen because our generation has become to extravagant in using resources over which we have no moral monopoly.

While we do our best to prevent accidents where we live, we have been unsuccessful in alleviating the silent tragedy of the poor and underprivileged. 13 to 18 million people, mostly children, die from hunger-related diseases each year. That is the same human toll as if 100 fully loaded 747 jets would crash each day.

And still, many living in the North don't feel that the label "rich" aptly describes our life situation. We pay our mortgages, we hope be able to support our children through school and to a decent start in life. Increasingly many of us

are unemployed.

Many of us give generously when there is a spectacular famine or catastrophe somewhere in the world, and to varying degrees, contribute to the governments' international assistance programmes through our taxes and duties.

I am pointing to this because "development" is not something for the third world alone. Indeed the industrialized countries are also developing countries, but their path of development is based on patterns of production and consumption that are unsustainable. We are facing increasing difficulties in putting more people to work, even though there is so much that needs to be done. We are all countries in transition. Our reliance on petroleum itself proves the point since this resource will soon be depleted if we continue at present rates.

These and a variety of other issues will form the agenda for the World Commission for the next two days. We will present the results of our deliberations on Friday morning. So stay with us. Faced with these challenges, why are we not doing more? This is a legitimate question which is being asked by concerned people and NGOs in many countries. My experience in life, as a physician, an environment minister, a party leader and a prime minister tells me this: an open process of fact-finding, participation, sharing of experience and exchange of views is the only viable path for change, within nations - and between nations. I say this because democratic processes can be painstaking. They can require immense tolerance, not only an open mind to the views of others. They require courage, endurance and stubborn consistency in pursuing goals.

I have been told by close friends on the commission how the focused efforts of the NGO community have been essential to the progress achieved over the past weeks on the road to Rio. This is no surprise to an environment minister, who built on the insights of scientists - and activists - in creating new policies, nationally and internationally.

Neither is it a surprise to a prime minister, who has experienced the growth of international interdependence and international understanding - the growth of a coalition of reason - which so clearly depends on the uniting of forces of democracy. We all have an obligation - and an opportunity - to contribute, to try to move insight and cooperation ahead. This is our challenge - this is your challenge - the challenge facing us all now at the end of the second millennium.

The era of procrastination and half-measures must come to its close. We must enter a period of firm action. It would amount to an abdication of duty without parallel if the opportunity created by UNCED were lost. The gradual watering-down of proposals which we have experienced in the preparatory process can still be reversed through public opinion, bringing pressure to bear at the top political levels in a number of key countries. We need new and meaningful decisions, not

repetitions of what we have already agreed and promises of good intentions.

We are grateful to the British government for their assistance in organizing the meeting. We are hopeful that the United Kingdom and other major countries will make new bold moves on behalf of the environment and for development. Rio offers the main chance for doing so. We on the Commission are privileged to have this opportunity to offer our advice at this important point in time.

I thank you for your attention.