

**OUR COMMON FUTURE: THE WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT**, Geneva, Switzerland, Oxford University Press, 1987. Pp. 400.

Global warming, threats to the Earth's ozone layer and deserts consuming agricultural land have become common concerns this past decade. Interrelated issues of environment and development have started to appear on the political agendas of nations worldwide. The problems associated with environmental degradation are serious concerns with no ready answers. In order to address these problems the Secretary-General of the United Nations called upon Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the present Norwegian Prime Minister, to establish and chair a special independent commission: the World Commission on Environment and Development.

On October 19, 1987<sup>1</sup> the World Commission presented its report, "Our Common Future," to the UN General Assembly. This report sets forth the major challenges to the world community: to achieve sustainable development by the year 2000 and beyond through multilateral solutions and a restructured international economic system of cooperation.

The Commission offers a new perspective on global problems. It prescribes realistic national and international strategies that give a positive vision of the future. These strategies are built on the assumption of intensified multilateral cooperation based on the recognition of the growing interdependence among nations in dealing with economic and environmental problems.

*Our Common Future* is written for decisionmakers and laymen alike. It is a comprehensive, balanced analysis supported by thorough research and the opinions of both recognized experts and the general public. The latter is a unique aspect of the Commission's work. Open public hearings were held in eight countries on five different continents (see Annex 2). The Commission also appointed a group of expert Special Advisors and constituted Advisory Panels to assist it in the analysis of the key issues. The Commission itself, comprised of twenty-one members from industrial and developing countries, managed to produce a unani-

1. The report as such was endorsed by consensus by the General Assembly, though it was not considered in detail.

mous report. This they accomplished notwithstanding the differences of culture, religion and regions among its members.

The report is divided into three separate parts. The first one, "Common Concerns," concentrates on threats to the world community and suggests strategies for finding solutions to environmental and economic problems in order to realize sustainable growth. In the second part, "Common Challenges," the report gives a more detailed description of the different fields that are affected. The third part, "Common Endeavors," first relates the present situation regarding the three "Commons": the Oceans, Space and Antarctica. It then shows the links between development and environment on the one hand, and peace and security on the other. This third part ends by proposing specific institutional and legal changes, which constitutes the Commission's most important contribution.

The core of the World Commission's work is the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable development is defined as human progress that meets the present social, economic and environmental objectives without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. For most of the modern world, industrialized and developing countries alike, a change in values, attitudes and policies is required in order to expand and sustain the ecological basis of development. The Commission feels the integration of environmental considerations into all policy decisionmaking and planning is crucial if sustainable growth is to be achieved.

The report emphasizes that separate policies and institutions can no longer manage the interlocked issues of environment and development. Sustainable development must be incorporated into the national economic policy and planning process. In response to this, Canada, for instance, has established the National Task Force on Environment and Economy.<sup>2</sup> Policies, programs and budgets must support development that is ecologically as well as economically sustainable. Governments should strengthen natural resource management and environmental protection agencies. They should also consider developing a "foreign policy for the environment," if they have not yet established such a policy. Existing international and regional organizations must

2. Linton, *Future Depends on Economy-Environment Link*, Calgary Herald, Dec. 3, 1987, at A5, col. 1.

be strengthened. The Commission emphasizes that both at the national and international level it is not enough just to suggest a different or strengthened institutional system, but that these agencies and organizations must also be made responsible and accountable for their actions.

The Commission stresses that poverty and short-sighted planning lie at the center of today's crisis in the economic and environmental fields. Today, technology and interventions in nature reach beyond national boundaries. Problems that before were local now affect areas distant from the source. To deal with increasing risks associated with new technologies the report suggests the establishment of a Global Risk Assessment Programme that would identify critical threats to the survival of the world community.

*Our Common Future* takes a holistic approach; it sees the world comprised of interrelated nations that must cooperate in order to meet the goals of economic and social development defined in terms of sustainability in all countries. The concept applies equally to developed and developing countries.

The report describes the link between trade and sustainable development. There is a clear correlation between the use of natural resources by developed countries and the depletion of these resources in developing countries. Full disclosure of the environmental effects of production processes and products should be carried out in all trade and co-operation with developing countries. The International Tropical Timber Agreement is used to illustrate how trade agreements can integrate environmental resource consideration into their policies.

Convincing arguments are made in support of the Commission's strategy regarding technology-transfers to promote sustainable development. One argument is that since pollution is not a problem reserved for the industrial countries, developing nations also need improved equipment to fight pollution. *Our Common Future* points out that reforms at an international level are needed to allow the world economy to stimulate growth of developing countries. But certain members of the U.N. Environmental program have noted that it does not discuss the role a free economy can play in bringing about environmental improvement.<sup>3</sup>

3. 42 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No.25) at 132, U.N. Doc. A/42/25 (1987).

The Commission points out that world population, increasing at a higher speed than the environment can accommodate, is of great concern. Although technological advances have increased the productivity of resources, the amount of natural resources remains finite. The increasing demands of a growing population is thus one of the greatest threats to the world environment. This fact, the Commission argues, is not a challenge solely to the Third World. Each additional person in the developed countries consumes a far greater number of resources than an additional person in a developing country.

International policies that interfere with economic development decrease a nation's ability to manage its population growth. The Commission supports this view by explaining how economic development, through its indirect impact on social and cultural factors, lowers fertility rates.<sup>4</sup> Improvement of health and education are also addressed in this context. Specifically, environmental education is introduced as an important element that should be included with other disciplines in formal education curriculum at all levels. This is intended to foster a sense of responsibility for the environment and its situation.

The link between the Third World and industrial countries is also discussed in the context of the extinction of species and the loss of genetic diversity. The agricultural industry is dependent upon genetic stocks which are only to be found in certain developing countries. The problems of deforestation and global warming are given an in-depth analysis in this context.

The Commission makes a thorough analysis of the interplay between environmental stress and military conflict which leads to unsustainable development. It further emphasizes the role of nuclear war as the ultimate cause of unsustainable development.

The legal means by which the goal of sustainable development can be reached are discussed in the last chapter (Chapter 12—Towards Common Action: Proposals for Institutional and Legal Change). Rights and responsibilities of individuals and states are to be recognized in a convention entitled "Legal Principles for Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development."<sup>5</sup> Under it, states, for instance, would be strictly liable for substantial transboundary harm due to certain dangerous but beneficial

4. *Big Goals for Little Children*, *The Economist*, March 19, 1988, at 91.

5. The report gives a summary of the principles and articles in Annex 1.

activities even when the activities were not known to be harmful at the time they were undertaken.

At the very end of the report the Commission briefly assesses the costs of the transition to sound environmental policies. In the short term the report predicts large financial outlays. Renewable energy development and pollution equipment are a heavy economic burden, but in the long term the Commission feels that this effort will be a good investment. Nations that have not made these investments are today paying more in terms of damage costs to human health, natural resources and the environment.

The Commission urges multilateral financial institutions to reorient their policies at the global level. In response, the World Bank has become the first institution to reorganize its lending programs to support sustainable development. In order to finance the cost of international action, the Commission suggests new approaches, such as voluntary contributions by governments. Though this may not seem politically feasible today, the Commission believes that given the negative trends described in the report, the need to support sustainable development will no longer be voluntary; political realities will make it essential. The report ends calling on the U.N. General Assembly to transform the report into a U.N. Programme of Action on Sustainable Development.

*Our Common Future* is a book well worth reading. The legal aspects provide a good basis for further discussion. The most important contribution, the concept of "sustainable development," linking economic growth with environment, may very well be a step in the right direction toward improving the environment. Though the Commission's report covers a large area, it is surprising to see that it has managed to analyze so many of the issues in an in-depth manner.

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