

Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future

“A global agenda for change” - this was what the World Commission on Environment and Development was asked to formulate. It was an urgent call by the General Assembly of the United Nations:

- to propose long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development by the year 2000 and beyond;
- to recommend ways concern for the environment may be translated into greater co-operation among developing countries and between countries at different stages of economical and social development and lead to the achievement of common and mutually supportive objectives that take account of the interrelationships between people, resources, environment, and development;
- to consider ways and means by which the international community can deal more effectively with environment concerns; and
- to help define shared perceptions of long-term environmental issues and the appropriate efforts needed to deal successfully with the problems of protecting and enhancing the environment, a long term agenda for action during the coming decades, and aspirational goals for the world community.

United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development

... 3. Sustainable Development

“The concept of sustainable development does imply limits - not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. But technology and social organization can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth.” (par. 27)

28. Meeting essential needs requires not only a new era of economic growth for nations in which the majority are poor, but an assurance that those poor get their fair share of the resources required to sustain that growth. Such equity would be aided by political systems that secure effective citizen participation in decision making and by greater democracy in international decision making.

29. Sustainable global development requires that those who are more affluent adopt life-styles within the planet's ecological means - in their use of energy, for example.

30. Yet in the end, sustainable development is not a fixed state of harmony, but rather a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, **the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs.**

... II. The Policy Directions

... 1. Population and Human Resources

43. Urgent steps are needed to limit extreme rates of population growth.

...44. Governments that need to do so should develop long-term, multifaceted population policies and a campaign to pursue broad demographic goals...

2. Food Security: Sustaining the Potential

... 48. Production in industrialized countries has usually been highly subsidized and protected from international competition. These subsidies have encouraged the overuse of soil and chemicals, the pollution of both water resources and foods with these chemicals, and the degradation of the countryside. Much of this effort has produced surpluses and their associated financial burdens. And some of this surplus has been sent at concessional rates to the developing world, where it has undermined the farming policies of recipient nations.

...3. Species and Ecosystems: Resources for Development

52. The planet's species are under stress. There is a growing scientific consensus that species are disappearing at rates never before witnessed on the planet, although there is also controversy over those rates and the risks they entail. Yet there is still time to halt this process.

53. The diversity of species is necessary for the normal functioning of ecosystems and the biosphere as a whole.

... 55. Governments can stem the destruction of tropical forests and other reservoirs of biological diversity while developing them economically. Reforming forest revenue systems and concession terms could raise billions of dollars of additional revenues, promote more efficient, long-term forest resource use, and curtail deforestation.

56. The network of protected areas that the world will need in the future must include much larger areas brought under some degree of protection. Therefore, the cost of conservation will rise - directly and in terms of opportunities for development foregone.

... 4. Energy: Choices for Environment and Development

... 60. Any new era of economic growth must therefore be less energy intensive than growth in the past. Energy efficiency policies must be the cutting edge of national energy strategies for sustainable development, and there is much scope for improvement in this direction.

... 62. Energy efficiency can only buy time for the world to develop 'low-energy paths' based on renewable sources, which should form the foundation of the global energy structure during the 21st Century. Most of these sources are currently problematic, but given innovative development, they could supply the same amount of primary energy the planet now consumes. However, achieving these use levels will require a programme of coordinated research, development, and demonstration projects commanding funding necessary to ensure the rapid development of renewable energy. Developing countries will require assistance to change their energy use patterns in this direction.

... 5. Industry: Producing More with Less

66. The world manufactures seven times more goods today than it did as recently as 1950. Given population growth rates, a five- to tenfold increase in manufacturing output will be needed just to raise developing world consumption of manufactured goods to industrialized world levels by the time population growth rates level off next century.

67. Experience in the industrialized nations has proved that anti-pollution technology has been cost-effective in terms of health, property, and environmental damage avoided, and that it has made many industries more profitable by making them more resource-efficient. While economic growth has continued, the consumption of raw materials has held steady or even declined, and new technologies offer further efficiencies.

68. Nations have to bear the costs of any inappropriate industrialization, and many developing countries are realizing that they have neither the resources nor - given rapid technological change - the time to damage their environments now and clean up later. But **they also need assistance and information from industrialized nations to make the best use of technology. Transnational corporations have a special responsibility to smooth the path of industrialization in the nations in which they operate.**

69. **Emerging technologies offer the promise of higher productivity, increased efficiency, and decreased pollution, but many bring risks of new toxic chemicals and wastes and of major accidents of a type and scale beyond present coping mechanisms.** There is an urgent need for tighter controls over the export of hazardous industrial and agricultural chemicals. Present controls over the dumping of hazardous wastes should be tightened.

70. Many essential human needs can be met only through goods and services provided by industry, and **the shift to sustainable development must be powered by a continuing flow of wealth from industry.** (See Chapter 8 for a wider discussion of these issues and recommendations.)

6. The Urban Challenge

...72. Few city governments in the developing world have the power, resources, and trained personnel to provide their rapidly growing populations with the land, services, and facilities needed for an adequate human life: clean water, sanitation, schools, and transport. The result is mushrooming illegal settlements with primitive facilities, increased overcrowding, and rampant disease linked to an unhealthy environment. Many cities in industrial countries also face problems - deteriorating infrastructure, environmental degradation, inner-city decay, and neighbourhood collapse. But with the means and resources to tackle this decline, the issue for most industrial countries is ultimately one of political and social choice. Developing countries are not in the same situation. They have a major urban crisis on their hands.

73. Governments will need to develop explicit settlements strategies to guide the process of urbanization, taking the pressure off the largest urban centres and building up smaller towns and cities, more closely integrating them with their rural hinterlands. This will mean examining and changing other policies - taxation, food pricing, transportation, health, industrialization - that work against the goals of settlements strategies.

74. Good city management requires decentralization of funds, political power, and personnel to local authorities, which are best placed to appreciate and manage local needs. But the sustainable development of cities will depend on closer work with the majorities of urban poor who are the true city builders, tapping the skills, energies and resources of neighbourhood groups and those in the 'informal sector'. Much can be

achieved by 'site and service' schemes that provide households with basic services and help them to get on with building sounder houses around these. (See Chapter 9 for a wider discussion of these issues and recommendations.)

III. International Cooperation and Institutional Reform

1. The Role of the International Economy

... 76. Growth in many developing countries is being stifled by depressed commodity prices, protectionism, intolerable debt burdens, and declining flows of development finance. If living standards are to grow so as to alleviate poverty, these trends must be reversed.

77. A particular responsibility falls to the World Bank and the International Development Association as the main conduit for multilateral finance to developing countries.

...78. The present level of debt service of many countries, especially in Africa and Latin America, is not consistent with sustainable development...Urgent action is necessary to alleviate debt burdens in ways that represent a fairer sharing between both debtors and lenders of the responsibilities and burdens.

80. Multinational companies can play an important role in sustainable development, especially as developing countries come to rely more on foreign equity capital. But if these companies are to have a positive influence on development, **the negotiating capacity of developing countries vis a vis transnationals must be strengthened so they can secure terms which respect their environmental concerns.**

81. However, these specific measures must be located in a wider context of effective cooperation to produce an international economic system geared to growth and the elimination of world poverty. (See Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of issues and recommendations on the international economy.)

2. Managing the Commons

82. Traditional forms of national sovereignty raise particular problems in managing the 'global commons' and their shared ecosystems - the oceans, outer space, and Antarctica. Some progress has been made in all three areas; much remains to be done.

83. The UN Conference on the Law of the Sea was the most ambitious attempt ever to provide an internationally agreed regime for the management of the oceans. All nations should ratify the Law of the Sea Treaty as soon as possible. Fisheries agreements should be strengthened to prevent current overexploitation, as should conventions to control and regulate the dumping of hazardous wastes at sea.

84. There are growing concerns about the management of **orbital space**, centering on using satellite technology for monitoring planetary systems; on making the most effective use of the limited capacities of geosynchronous orbit for communications satellites; and on limiting space debris. The orbiting and testing of weapons in space would greatly increase this debris. The international community should seek to design and implement a space regime to ensure that space remains a peaceful environment for the benefit of all.

85. Antarctica is managed under the 1959 Antarctica Treaty. However, many nations outside of that pact view the Treaty System as too limited, both in participation and in the scope of its conservation measures.

The Commission's recommendations deal with the safeguarding of present achievements; the incorporation of any minerals development into a management regime; and various options for the future. (See Chapter 10 for more discussion in issues and recommendations on the management of the commons.)

... 4. Institutional and Legal Change

89. The Report that follows contains throughout (and especially in Chapter 12), many specific recommendations for institutional and legal change. These cannot be adequately summarized here. However, **the Commission's main proposals are embodied in six priority areas.**

4.1 Getting at the Sources

90. Governments must begin now to make the key national, economic, and sectoral agencies directly responsible and accountable for ensuring that their policies, programmes, and budgets support development that is economically and ecologically sustainable.

91. By the same token, the various regional organizations need to do more to integrate environment fully in their goals and activities.

...92. All major international bodies and agencies should ensure that their programmes encourage and support sustainable development, and they should greatly improve their coordination and cooperation.

4.2 Dealing with the Effects

93. **Governments should also reinforce the roles and capacities of environmental protection and resource management agencies.** This is needed in many industrialized countries, but most urgently in developing countries, which will need assistance in strengthening their institutions. **The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) should be strengthened as the principal source on environmental data, assessment, and reporting and as the principal advocate and agent for change and international cooperation on critical environment and natural resource protection issues.**

4.3 Assessing Global Risks

94. The capacity to identify, assess, and report on risks of irreversible damage to natural systems and threats to the survival, security, and well being of the world community must be rapidly reinforced and extended. **Governments, individually and collectively, have the principal responsibility to do this.** UNEP's Earthwatch programme should be the centre of leadership in the UN system on risk assessment.

95. However, given the politically sensitive nature of many of the most critical risks, there is also a need for an independent but complementary capacity to assess and report on critical global risks. **A new international programme for cooperation among largely non-governmental organizations, scientific bodies, and industry groups should therefore be established for this purpose.**

4.4 Making Informed Choices

96. Making the difficult choices involved in achieving sustainable development will depend on the widespread support and involvement of an **informed public and of NGOs**, the scientific community, and industry. **Their rights, roles and participation in development planning, decision-making, and project implementation should be expanded.**

4.5 Providing the Legal Means

97. **National and international law is being rapidly outdistanced by the accelerating pace and expanding scale of impacts on the ecological basis of development. Governments now need to fill major gaps in existing national and international law related to the environment**, to find ways to recognize and protect the rights of present and future generations to an environment adequate for their health and well-being, **to prepare under UN auspices a universal Declaration on environmental protection and sustainable development and a subsequent Convention**, and **to strengthen procedures for avoiding or resolving disputes on environment and resource management issues.**

... Our Common Future, Annexe 1: Summary of Proposed Legal Principles for Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development Adopted by the WCED Experts Group on Environmental Law

I. General Principles, Rights, and Responsibilities

Fundamental Human Right

1. **All human beings have the fundamental right to an environment adequate for their health and well being.**

Inter-Generational Equity

2. **States shall conserve and use the environment and natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations.**

Conservation and Sustainable Use

3. **States shall maintain ecosystems and ecological processes essential for the functioning of the biosphere, shall preserve biological diversity, and shall observe the principle of optimum sustainable yield in the use of living natural resources and ecosystems.**

Environmental Standards and Monitoring

4. States shall establish adequate environmental protection standards and monitor changes in and publish relevant data on environmental quality and resource use.

Prior Environmental Assessments

5. States shall make or require prior environmental assessments of proposed activities which may significantly affect the environment or use of a natural resource.

Prior Notification, Access, and Due Process

6. States shall inform in a timely manner all persons likely to be significantly affected by a planned activity and to grant them equal access and due process in administrative and judicial proceedings.

Sustainable Development and Assistance

7. States shall ensure that conservation is treated as an integral part of the planning and implementation of development activities and provide assistance to other States, especially to developing countries, in support of environmental protection and sustainable development.

General Obligation to Cooperate

8. States shall cooperate in good faith with other States in implementing the preceding rights and obligations.

II. Principles, Rights and Obligations Concerning Transboundary Natural Resources and Environmental Interferences Reasonable and Equitable Use

9. States shall use transboundary natural resources in a reasonable and equitable manner.

Prevention and Abatement

10. States shall prevent or abate any transboundary environmental interference which could cause or causes significant harm (but subject to certain exceptions provided for in #11 and #12 below).

Strict Liability

11. States shall take all reasonable precautionary measures to limit the risk when carrying out or permitting certain dangerous but beneficial activities and shall ensure that compensation is provided should substantial transboundary harm occur even when the activities were not known to be harmful at the time they were undertaken.

Prior Agreements When Prevention Costs Greatly Exceed Harm

12. States shall enter into negotiations with the affected State on the equitable conditions under which the activity could be carried out when planning to carry out or permit activities causing transboundary harm which is substantial but far less than the cost of prevention. (If no agreement can be reached, see Art. 22).

Non-Discrimination

13. States shall apply as a minimum at least the same standards for environmental conduct and impacts regarding transboundary natural resources and environmental interferences as are applied domestically (i.e., do not do to others what you would not do to your own citizens).

General Obligation to Cooperate on Transboundary Environmental Problems

14. States shall cooperate in good faith with other States to achieve optimal use of transboundary natural resources and effective prevention or abatement of transboundary environmental interferences.

Exchange of Information

15. States of origin shall provide timely and relevant information to the other concerned States regarding transboundary natural resources or environmental interferences.

Prior Assessment and Notification

16. States shall provide prior and timely notification and relevant information to the other concerned States and shall make or require an environmental assessment of planned activities which may have significant transboundary effects.

Prior Consultations

17. States of origin shall consult at an early stage and in good faith with other concerned States regarding existing or potential transboundary interferences with their use of a natural resource or the environment.

Cooperative Arrangements for Environmental Assessment and Protection

18. States shall cooperate with the concerned States in monitoring, scientific research and standard setting regarding transboundary natural resources and environmental interferences.

Emergency Situations

19. States shall develop contingency plans regarding emergency situations likely to cause transboundary environmental interferences and shall promptly warn, provide relevant information to and co-operate with concerned States when emergencies occur.

Equal Access and Treatment

20. States shall grant equal access, due process and equal treatment in administrative and judicial proceedings to all persons who are or may be affected by transboundary interferences with their use of a natural resource or the environment.

III. State Responsibility

21. States shall cease activities which breach an international obligation regarding the environment and provide compensation for the harm caused.

IV. Peaceful Settlement of Disputes

22. States shall settle environmental disputes by peaceful means. If mutual agreement on a solution or on other dispute settlement arrangements is not reached within 18 months, the dispute shall be submitted to conciliation and, if unresolved thereafter, to arbitration or judicial settlement at the request of any of the concerned States.

Footnote

* This summary is based on the more detailed legal formulations in the report to the Commission by the international legal experts group. (See *Annexe 2* for a list of group members.) This summary highlights only the main thrusts of the principles and Articles and is not a substitute for the full text is published in *Legal Principles for Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, in press)."

Our Common Future, Chapter 2: Towards Sustainable Development ***The Concept of Sustainable***

I. Development

II. Equity and the Common Interest

III. Strategic Imperatives

1. ***Reviving Growth***
2. ***Changing the quality of Growth***
3. ***Meeting Essential Human Needs***
4. ***Ensuring a Sustainable Level of Population***
5. ***Conserving and Enhancing the Resource Base***
6. ***Reorienting Technology and Managing Risk***
7. ***Merging Environment and Economics in Decision Making***

IV. Conclusion

1. Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:

the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and

the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.

2. Thus the goals of economic and social development must be defined in terms of sustainability in all countries - developed or developing, market-oriented or centrally planned. Interpretations will vary, but must share certain general features and must flow from a consensus on the basic concept of sustainable development and on a broad strategic framework for achieving it.

3. **Development involves a progressive transformation of economy and society**. A development path that is sustainable in a physical sense could theoretically be pursued even in a rigid social and political setting. But physical sustainability cannot be secured unless development policies pay attention to such considerations as changes in access to resources and in the distribution of costs and benefits. Even the narrow notion of physical sustainability implies a concern for social equity between generations, a concern that must logically be extended to equity within each generation.