

The Brundtland Report: An update

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Your Royal Highness,
Madam Secretary of State,
Madam Governor,
Mister President,
Distinguished guests and colleagues of the Belgian Council for Sustainable Development!

It is a pleasure for me to be with you today in celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Brundtland Report. This meeting takes place in an extremely challenging period.

20 years after the release of the Brundtland Report sustainable development is one of the key issues on the political agenda. In your country, in my country, in Europe, and even in China and in the USA: Al Gore has done a marvellous job for all of us. The issue is at the top of the international agenda.

When talking about sustainability today we have to raise the energy and climate issues as the first and top issues. Climate change victimized us all. Nobody can hide from it. Nobody can simply buy protection. As Gro Harlem Brundtland, today the UN Special Envoy to the Secretary General of the UN, recently put it like this: “It is irresponsible, reckless, and deeply immoral to question the real danger of climate change.”

Today, any politics on sustainability has to start off with energy and climate. I say: Energy is the key issue, but sustainability is the frame:

- Energy policies need that broader frame of ecology, economy and social aspects.

- But up until this very day, our energy and climate policy is still perceived as a single-silo policy. There is no comprehensive sustainability approach.

I would like to underline the importance of climate change in relation to equity, justice, and freedom. Climate change puts our understanding of justice and democracy to test. The Indian Prime Minister was right when he said in 2002: "We do not believe that the ethos of democracy can support any norm other than equal per capita rights to global environmental resources". I think it is good that the German Chancellor, Mrs Angela Merkel recalled this during this year's G8 Summit, and is constantly repeating this insight.

I know: This is a vision. Some people say: This is unrealistic. My argument is a very simple. In the history of mankind such far reaching visions have changed the world. Let me give you an example, which might be a comparison. The American Revolution started with the vision: "One man – one vote". This vision was for a long period the guideline. In my country it took more than 100 years to bring this vision to reality; today it is regarded as a matter of course. But don't forget: It took more than 100 years.

Regarding climate change we do not have 100 years to change the course of the world.

We have to get the challenge of climate change right:

- It is a question of human dignity.
- It is about human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- We are up against vested interests of those who are still benefiting from the deterioration of the global ecology. .
- Only a low carbon economy can lead us on the journey towards a sustainable economy and welfare.

There are also a couple of things that encourages us on our way. They are sharpening our arguments, they are providing power, and they are opening up new options.

- Economy: We learnt from Sir Nicholas Stern that a deteriorated ecology is a tremendous damage to the global economy. And the corporate sector is following up on this, accepting that there is a business case. Stern told us the simple economic truth: Inaction is more expensive than taking the necessary actions now.

- Science: The IPCC told us that there is sound scientific proof of the man-made factors of climate change. And where there is a man-made cause of climate change, there should also be a man-made solution to it.
- Technology: There are promising new technologies. Priority 1 is energy productivity. Priority 2 are renewables. Solar and wind technologies are successfully entering the market. Biofuels can be an option if they do not create new problems by unsustainable harvesting of biomass for agrofuels.
- Diplomacy: There are new prospects for the Kyoto-follow-up negotiations under the umbrella of the UN framework. Though, this pathway is still clouded by the stance of the US and the lack of trust between the industrialized and the emerging economies.
- Governance: National Sustainability Strategies are increasingly providing political backup for action on local, regional and national level, and in the EU.

II

The World Commission on Environment and Development, in which I had the honour to be a member, worked from 1985 - 1987. We called our report “Our Common Future. A global agenda for change”. Gro Harlem Brundtland chaired this Commission. In those times she was the Prime Minister of Norway, later she became President of the World Health Organisation. She is now appointed Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General on Climate Change.

Our Report marks a point in history when awareness was growing that

- we risked overstepping limits in the world we share;
- we need to adapt our use of natural resources to the long-term carrying capacity of the planet;
- and that unequal opportunity and unequal distribution of resources were at the heart of the problem.

The UN established the Brundtland Commission because a solution to these problems was not in sight. People found themselves struck in controversies and policies were totally gridlocked.

The predominant thinking at that time was: It is either the environment you can protect or it is the economy you can develop. You can not have it both ways.

The Brundtland Commission faced this setting with a new political idea: A sustainable development is how we recommend to face the challenge of meeting the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

This political concept includes equity and justice, within and between generations. It was new in several aspects:

- New was the notion of equity and justice not only within generations, but also between generations.
- New was the clear idea of developing a shared understanding of the long-term goals for human life on earth.
- New was the idea of new governance instruments and of building collective action.
- New was the resoluteness with which we advocated the need for leadership and building trust with others.
- New – and the most powerful recommendation we came up with – was an idea about the process how to deal with our Report. In our Report we said: “Within an appropriate period of time after the presentation of the report to the General Assembly an international conference could be convened.” This brought the Rio-process on the agenda. We provided momentum. We experienced high expectations in 1992 in Rio. We also experienced the downs in the global follow up of Rio. There was a multitude of gatherings, from Kyoto to Bonn, Marrakech, and Dehli. The world adopted the Millennium Development Goals. Johannesburg in 2002 openly displayed both frustrations and unwillingness.

Personally, I have to admit that we almost underestimated the impact this recommendation on process would add to the overall effort. However, the process that started with Rio reached out to the people. It attracted the perception of politicians and Parliaments, of foundations and the private sector. It is at the heart of political debate between the various stakeholders, on the various levels from the UN-Commission on Sustainable Development to regional and local action. Basically, it provides the red thread and created something like a global community.

III

As for updating today the Brundtland-Message: We have to acknowledge that the world has changed dramatically: The Cold War ended. The stalled two-block confrontation gave way to a multipolar world. Powerful economies in the BRICS-countries and elsewhere are influencing the structure of the world economy. Globalisation has added new opportunities and new questions. We have been watching failed states. Totalitarianism is on the rise and the notion of security is now enlarged and discussed in the scope of energy and climate change. Communication in the global village tends to bring about new cultural features.

Still, I'm convinced that the Brundtland-Report holds some key issues that are valid solid today.

- **Conflict Prevention:** The Report does not at all underestimate the issue of proliferation of nuclear arms. However, the situation has even worsened. Probably, the spread in use of nuclear weapons is already out of control. In general, arms trade is the one single problem with the most anti-development impact.
- **Poverty:** The Millenium Development Goals are a remarkable effort. There is progress in many places in the world. However, it is very clear: The business-as-usual approach will not come to meet the MDG requirements.
- **Growth:** Our pledge was that growth is about choice, about quality, and that means: about sustainability. Up until today, it is not yet understood nor implemented that dependence on finite resources and environmental damage is anti-growth politics. The perspective on growth is still deteriorated by inadequate economic thinking. It was Albert Einstein who told us: „You cannot solve the problem with the same thinking which created the problem.“
- **Energy and climate:** In 1987, we compared climate change with the threat of nuclear war. This statement was highly criticized. But today we know: We were right. Now, the scientific evidence is overwhelming, and the economics of climate change are clear. The Stern report tells us, what has to be done. It is time for action for a low carbon economy.
- **Food security:** Twenty years ago, the world produces more food per head of population than ever before in human history. However, food security and safety are

today more on the brink than 20 years ago. Linking the oil price to the pricing of food is creating a new problem. That is exactly the most urgent threshold of bioenergy strategies.

- Urbanisation sprawl and megacities are putting themselves at risk in terms of resource consumption..

These are six issues of the Brundtland Report which are still valid today. It is beyond doubt: Sustainable development has all characteristics that qualify for a major political momentum. And there are positive and encouraging trends.

- Take a closer look into Europe. The enlargement of the European Union is a great move. The Aquis Communautaire is an invitation to democracy and peace. We are on a good way to make it an invitation to sustainability policies as well. The EU sustainability strategy encourages us to think harder and to implement sustainability more effectively.
- Take a closer look into what happens in Asia in terms of growth and sustainability. It is encouraging to learn that nowadays we discuss sustainability at eye level. Asian countries are particularly interested in building technical and procedural know how in order to build up resource- and energy efficient industries within their countries and export environmental sound technologies worldwide.

Some say: We in Europe should never agree to standards that are not accepted by China and India. I think the opposite is true. We should never feel comfortable with per capita standards which we do not wish being implemented in China and India. In the long run, it is this philosophy that will lead to success. That is sustainability.

- Take a closer look into what happens in the United States on the regional level and in particular in the private sector. What you see are bottom-up movements with fantastic and inspiring initiatives of „Greening America“. You see emission trading, renewable energies increasing their share of energy supply, efficiency gains and the prospect to commercialise a low carbon power plant.

IV

What does all this mean to us today?

First:

We need to substitute fossil fuels through renewable energies. We need to become more energy efficient in our production and our consumption patterns. We need to introduce new, clean technologies for the use of coal and gas. We need to tackle the carbon economy – by making it a clean economy.

The EU has adopted ambitious targets in February of this year. The decision was met on a 20% reduction of energy use through increased energy productivity by 2020, on an increase of the share of renewables to 20% by 2020 and on an increase of the share of agrofuels to 10% by 2020. I appreciate this approach. Though, we need more and stringent implementation. There is no deficit in goal setting, but there are deficits in implementation.

The Brundtland Report addressed the management of the Commons. Still today, managing the Commons is unfinished business. We have convincing targets. Goal setting is not the problem. Implementation is crucial, adequate management actions are missing.

To illustrate my arguments: Under the Kyoto regime the EU accepted a reduction of 12 % green house gases by 2012. At the end of 2006 the EU reached a reduction of 1.7 %. There was a meeting of the heads of government early 2007; they said: The situation is serious and therefore we have to increase our targets to 20 % by the year 2020 – but: without discussing roles and responsibilities, without defining time tables and milestones, without establishing processes and technologies, without organizing reporting and controlling systems. Not to speak of impact assessment and sustainability checks where Belgium has an outstanding role. All these important things have not been taken into consideration. Therefore I insist: Goal setting is not the problem, implementation is crucial.

Second:

The hazards of climate change can't be neglected; they can't be rejected or simply ignored. No country can just opt out when sea levels are rising. Those who ignore the effects of climate change – I want to be very clear – they act irresponsible, irrational and immoral.

We awfully need a revival of multilateralism. There is no doubt that we have to rethink the global governance and UN institutions as regards the environment and sustainability issues. The future of multilateralism is bound to legitimacy, credibility, and trust – all of which I do not see well guarded in the current system.

The old market economy created the climate disaster as it once created the environmental pollution. Fixing the problem requires providing market economy with a frame, and giving it directions. That is exactly what the European emission trading system and other climate regulations are about. We need caps and targets for a new market economy to function for the environment. At the end of the day, we need it under the umbrella of the United Nations.

Third:

I suggest new stimulus and initiatives at the national level. National action towards global sustainability is the one most important factor. We have to design the business case for sustainability. Take the example of renewable energies. We need to adjust our industry and our R&D policy as well as foreign trade promotion to the demand that increasingly will derive from emerging economies. Europe can achieve to be the most competitive and the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world – but only if Europe is actively setting the standard. This standard setting is by no means a technical task. It is a core element of the European social and economic model. A low-carbon economy is as close as you can get to set new standards and to create new markets. This is what our policy makers have to accept.

Globalisation does not render national policies unnecessary. Properly performed, national pioneering gets rewarded internationally. A national strategy on sustainable development can play an important role as driver for innovation. The low carbon transition needs long term policy frameworks at the national level. This is why I want to point out the case of New Zealand. Prime Minister Helen Clark is the first leader in the world to proclaim a national way towards a low carbon economy. And we see: Once the overall goal is established, some other things fall into places, as for instance a national emission trading scheme for New Zealand.

V

If I were to single out the one most important overall challenge for sustainability strategies, the management instruments would be it.

The command-and-control approach will not help us to face this challenge. Neither will the “let the business do it” approach yield the necessary effects. Standard perception of administration and business as mutual enemies can not be expected to settle the case. The Management of the Commons requires new ways, new institutions und processes with an engagement of the administration and the business-community and the consumers.

Measurement is a prerequisite for good management. You can only manage what you can measure.

We have to come up with new forms of collective leadership. The National Councils for Sustainable Development are designed to stimulate an informed debate in the civil society. I am grateful to the Belgium council for the support and active contribution to the initiative that brought together national councils throughout Europe. I am grateful to Jan de Smedt, the Secretary General of the Belgian Council, who played and still plays an important role in sharing European experiences. A lively debate and ambitious policies are what we need in Germany as well as in Belgium. Nobody has a final answer to all our questions around sustainability. Quarrel is inevitable. Most important is to find new ways to involve stakeholders. That is why I appreciate very much the initiative of our Belgian Colleagues for this Conference.

To end my talk, I would like to mention one issue where the Brundtland Report missed the point. In the past 20 years the private and the public sector have developed tools and instruments to manage sustainability projects. But I do see two cultures, the private and the public sector. Those cultures seem to speak different languages. There is no much talk as to how to combine different approaches.

But we cannot afford this gap. We cannot afford our all too fragmented policies. I am afraid we will not be in the position to achieve the ambitious climate targets if we do not develop a new linking of the business case and the regulatory framework, the demand-side approaches and the consumption patterns and life-styles.

I advocate taking sustainability strategies serious. I want to sum up with three points:

- We need more fantasy. We need more courage and trust in order to experiment with sustainability strategies.
- We need participation and dialogue between stakeholders from government, business, science and civil society.
- We need leadership to manage the commons. Sustainability strategies should provide for public visibility and ambitious processes.

This is the core of the problem of sustainability policies - constantly since 20 years.

And as for celebrating the 20 years anniversary of the Brundtland Report I ask you to keep the words of the great French Jean Jaurès in mind: “Tradition means to keep the fire alive and not to admire the ashes.”