IMPORTANCE OF BRUNDTLAND REPORT IN THE PROTECTION OF ENVIRONMENT: A LEGAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

After the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment and the 1980 World Conservation Strategy of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the leaders of our world realized that we needed to create an organization whose sole purpose was to raise awareness of the need for sustainable development as with the rapid industrialization and growth developing countries were desperate to use cheap methods with high environmental impact and unethical labor practices in their push to industrialize.

This paper, talks how Brundtland Report proved to be the most successful of the human community towards the conservation of environment.

This paper answers as to, can people build a future that is more prosperous, with the increased industrialisation? And further, it critically reviews Brudtland Reports, and authors also review its importance as being a foundational pillar, in the protection of environment.

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1. Introduction

Conventions and Conferences before Brundtland Commission- i.e. Basis of Brundtland Commission (Stockholm, Etc.)

Stockholm Conference

When the UN General Assembly decided to convene the 1972 Stockholm Conference, at the initiative of the Government of Sweden, UN Secretary-General U Thant invited Maurice Strong to lead it as Secretary-General of the Conference.2

The conference was opened and addressed by the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme and Secretary-general Kurt Waldheim to discuss the state of the global environment. Attended by the representatives of 113 countries, 19 inter-governmental agencies, and more than 400 inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, it is widely recognized as the beginning of modern political and public awareness of global environmental problems.3

The meeting agreed upon a Declaration containing 26 principles concerning the environment and development; an Action Plan with 109 recommendations, and a Resolution.

HISTORY OF BRUNDTLAND COMMISSION

After the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment and the 1980 World Conservation Strategy of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the leaders of our world realized that we needed to create an organization whose sole purpose was to raise awareness of the need for sustainable development. During this time period, people in developed countries were starting to become more aware about environmental issues stemming from industrialization and growth. Developed countries wanted to reduce the environmental impact of their growth. On the other hand, developing countries were becoming discouraged because they were not at and could not reach the higher levels of economic growth that industrialized countries had.4 Because of this need for growth, developing countries were desperate to use cheap methods with high environmental impact

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2 Strong, Maurice. Where on Earth are We Going? (2001).
and unethical labor practices in their push to industrialize. The United Nations saw a growing need for an organization to address these environmental challenges which were intertwined with economic and social conditions as well.

In December 1983, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, asked the Prime Minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, to create an organization independent of the UN to focus on environmental and developmental problems and solutions after an affirmation by the General Assembly resolution in the fall of 1984. This new organization was the Brundtland Commission, or more formally, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). The Brundtland Commission was first headed by Gro Harlem Brundtland as Chairman and Mansour Khalid as Vice-Chairman.

The organization aimed to create a united international community with shared sustainability goals by identifying sustainability problems worldwide, raising awareness about them, and suggesting the implementation of solutions. In 1987, the Brundtland Commission published the first volume of “Our Common Future,” the organization’s main report. “Our Common Future” strongly influenced the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992 and the third UN Conference on Environment and Development in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002. Also, it is credited with crafting the most prevalent definition of sustainability, as seen below.

**Events before Brundtland**

The Brundtland Report was intended as a response to the conflict between the nascent order promoting globalized economic growth and the accelerating ecological degradation occurring on a global scale. The challenge posed in the 1980s was to harmonize prosperity with ecology. This postulated finding the means to continue economic growth without undue harm to the environment. To address the urgent needs of developing countries (Third World), the United Nations saw a need to strike a better balance of human and environmental well-being. This was to be achieved by redefining the concepts of economic development as the new idea of sustainable development, as it was christened in the Brundtland Report.\(^5\)

The 1983 General Assembly passed Resolution 38/161 "Process of preparation of the Environmental Perspective to the Year 2000 and Beyond", establishing the Commission. The

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Brundtland Commission draws upon several notions in its definition of sustainable development, which is the most frequently cited definition of the concept to date.

A key element in the definition is the unity of environment and development. The Brundtland Commission argues against the assertions of the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment and provides an alternative perspective on sustainable development, unique from that of the 1980 World Conservation Strategy of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. The Brundtland Commission pushed for the idea that while the "environment" was previously perceived as a sphere separate from human emotion or action, and while "development" was a term habitually used to describe political goals or economic progress, it is more comprehensive to understand the two terms in relation to each other (We can better understand the environment in relation to development and we can better understand development in relation to the environment, because they cannot and should not be distinguished as separate entities). Brundtland argues:
"...the "environment" is where we live; and "development" is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable."

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

The term sustainable development was coined in the paper *Our Common Future*, released by the Brundtland Commission. Sustainable development is the kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The two key concepts of sustainable development are: • the concept of "needs" in particular the essential needs of the world's poorest people, to which they should be given overriding priority; and • the idea of limitations which is imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet both present and future needs.\[6\]

Most agree that the central idea of the Brundtland Commission's definition of "sustainable development" is that of intergenerational equity. In sum, the "needs" are basic and essential, economic growth will facilitate their fulfillment, and equity is encouraged by citizen participation. Therefore, another characteristic that really sets this definition apart from others is the element of humanity that the Brundtland Commission integrates.

Intergenerational equity is a concept that says that humans hold the natural and cultural environment of the Earth in common both with other members of the present generation and...
with other generations, past and future' (Weiss, 1990, p. 8). It means that we inherit the Earth from previous generations and have an obligation to pass it on in reasonable condition to future generations.

The idea behind not reducing the ability of future generations to meet their needs is that, although future generations might gain from economic progress, those gains might be more than offset by environmental deterioration. Most people would acknowledge a moral obligation to future generations, particularly as people who are not yet born can have no say in decisions taken today that may affect them.

2. Principles Deliberated Upon in the Brundtland Commission

Brundtland Commission was formally known as the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). Its mission is to unite countries to pursue sustainable development together. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, former Secretary General of the United Nations, was appointed as the Chairman of the Gro Harlem Brundtland Commission in December 1983. At the time, the UN General Assembly realized that there was a heavy deterioration of the human environment and natural resources. To rally countries to work and pursue sustainable development together, the UN decided to establish the Brundtland Commission. Gro Harlem Brundtland was the former Prime Minister of Norway and was chosen due to her strong background in the sciences and public health. The Brundtland Commission officially dissolved in December 1987 after releasing Our Common Future, also known as the Brundtland Report, in October 1987, a document that coined, and defined the meaning of the term "Sustainable Development". 

The Brundtland Report was primarily concerned with securing a global equity, redistributing resources towards poorer nations whilst encouraging their economic growth. The report also suggested that equity, growth and environmental maintenance are simultaneously possible and that each country is capable of achieving its full economic potential whilst at the same time preserving the planet.

time enhancing its resource base. The report also recognized that achieving this equity and sustainable growth would require technological and social change.

The report highlighted three fundamental components to sustainable development: environmental protection, economic growth and social equity. The environment should be conserved and our resource base enhanced, by gradually changing the ways in which we develop and use technologies. Developing nations must be allowed to meet their basic needs of employment, food, energy, water and sanitation. If this is to be done in a sustainable manner, then there is a definite need for a sustainable level of population. Economic growth should be revived and developing nations should be allowed a growth of equal quality to the developed nations.

**Resolution establishing the Commission**

The 1983 General Assembly passed Resolution 38/161 "Process of preparation of the Environmental Perspective to the Year 2000 and Beyond", establishing the Commission. In A/RES/38/161, the General Assembly:

"8. Suggests that the Special Commission, when established, should focus mainly on the following terms of reference for its work:

(a) To propose long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development to the year 2000 and beyond;
(b) To recommend ways in which concern for the environment may be translated into greater co-operation among developing countries and between countries at different stages of economic and social development and lead to the achievement of common and mutually supportive objectives which take account of the interrelationships between people, resources, environment and development;
(c) To consider ways and means by which the international community can deal more effectively with environmental concerns, in the light of the other recommendations in its report;
(d) To help to define shared perceptions of long-term environmental issues and of the appropriate efforts needed to deal successfully with the problems of protecting and enhancing

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the environment, a long-term agenda for action during the coming decades, and aspirational goals for the world community, taking into account the relevant resolutions of the session of a special character of the Governing Council in 1982.\textsuperscript{8}

“\textit{Our Common Future}”

Our Common Future, also known as the Brundtland Report, from the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) was published in 1987.

Its targets were multilateralism and interdependence of nations in the search for a sustainable development path. The report sought to recapture the spirit of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment - the Stockholm Conference - which had introduced environmental concerns to the formal political development sphere. Our Common Future placed environmental issues firmly on the political agenda; it aimed to discuss the environment and development as one single issue.

The document was the culmination of a “900 day” international-exercise which catalogued, analysed, and synthesised: written submissions and expert testimony from “senior government representatives, scientists and experts, research institutes, industrialists, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and the general public” held at public hearings throughout the world.

The Brundtland Commission’s mandate was to:\textsuperscript{9}

1. “re-examine the critical issues of environment and development and to formulate innovative, concrete, and realistic action proposals to deal with them;
2. strengthen international cooperation on environment and development and to assess and propose new forms of cooperation that can break out of existing patterns and influence policies and events in the direction of needed change; and

3. raise the level of understanding and commitment to action on the part of individuals, voluntary organizations, businesses, institutes, and governments”. “The Commission focused its attention in the areas of population, food security, the loss of species and genetic resources, energy, industry, and human settlements - realizing that all of these are connected and cannot be treated in isolation one from another”

Earth Summit

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Rio Summit, Rio Conference, and Earth Summit, was a major United Nations conference held in Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992.

The Earth Summit was inspired and guided by a remarkable document of 1987, i.e., Brundtland Report and took the concept of Sustainable development ahead to an all new level and introduced the following three things in this summit:

- Rio Declaration on Environment and Development;
- Agenda 21;
- Forest Principles.

3. “Our Common Future”

The Brundtland Commission believed that people can build a future that is more prosperous, more just, and more secure. Its report, Our Common Future, is not a prediction of ever increasing environmental decay, poverty, and hardship in an ever more polluted world among ever decreasing resources. The Commission see instead the possibility for a new era of economic growth, one that must be based on policies that sustain and expand the
environmental resource base. And it believed such growth to be absolutely essential to relieve the great poverty that is deepening in much of the developing world.

But the Commission's hope for the future is conditional on decisive political action now to begin managing environmental resources to ensure both sustainable human progress and human survival. The Commission is not forecasting a future; it is serving a notice - an urgent notice based on the latest and best scientific evidence that the time has come to take the decisions needed to secure the resources to sustain this and coming generations. It does not offer a detailed blueprint for action, but instead a pathway by which the peoples of the world may enlarge their spheres of cooperation.

The body of the Brundtland Report 'Our Common Future' comprises over three hundred pages, and is divided to three more-or-less equal parts, on

I. Our common concerns;
II. Our common challenges; and
III. Our common endeavours.

Part I: Our Common Concerns

The part I of the report deals with the common concerns of the global community. It lays down those issues which are the cause of concern for almost every economy of the world. The development pattern of the developing and the underdeveloped economies is greatly influenced by the pattern of the developed economies. Thus, the environmental and social consequences over the economies are similar and to an extent common. This part of the report discusses in depth the common concerns of all the countries of the world. This part is further divided into 3 Chapters.

Chapter 1 encapsulates the deliberations over the threatened future of the world as the unbalanced development pattern of the economies do not give due concern to the environmental as well as the social problems arising. Those looking for success and signs of hope can find many: infant mortality is falling; human life expectancy is increasing; the proportion of the world's adults who can read and write is climbing; the proportion of children starting school is rising; and global food production increases faster than the population grows. The gap between rich and poor nations is widening - not shrinking - and
there is little prospect, given present trends and institutional arrangements, that this process will be reversed.

Thus, the commission in this chapter came to a conclusion that the goal of sustainable development is not only for the developing countries but also for the already industrialised ones.

Chapter 2 deals with the concept of ‘Sustainable Development’. The concept is based on the premise that humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. 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.

Chapter 3 of Part I deal with the role of the international economy towards the achievement of sustainable development. Developing countries therefore have to work ... to build up their technological capabilities. Reforms at an international level are now needed to deal instantaneously ... to stimulate growth of developing countries while giving weight to environmental concerns. The response of the industrialised to the problems of the developing economies has been negative. Development vis-a-vis environmental challenges can only be faced when there is an inter-governmental harmony between the economies. It is only when the international economy comes together, can the goal of sustainable development be reached. The challenges are both interdependent and integrated, requiring comprehensive approaches and popular participation. This way the report foresees the existence of a sustainable world economy.

Part II: Our Common Challenges

The Commission has focused its attention in the areas of population, food security, the loss of species and genetic resources, energy, industry, and human settlements - realizing that all of these are connected and cannot be treated in isolation one from another. This part deals with 6 challenges (divided in chapters 4-9) which are common to all the economies.
Chapter 4 deals with the challenge of population explosion. In many parts of the world, the population is growing at rates that cannot be sustained by available environmental resources, at rates that are outstripping any reasonable expectations of improvements in housing, health care, food security, or energy supplies. The issue is not just numbers of people, but how those numbers relate to available resources. Thus the ‘population problem’ must be dealt with in part by efforts to eliminate mass poverty, in order to assure more equitable access to resources, and by education to improve human potential to manage those resources.

Chapter 5 deals with the challenge of food security. Growth in world cereal production has steadily outstripped world population growth. Yet each year there are more people in the world who do not get enough food. Global agriculture has the potential to grow enough food for all, but food is often not available where it is needed. 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. Many developing countries, on the other hand, have suffered the opposite problem: farmers are not sufficiently supported.

Chapter 6 deals with the challenges faced regarding the depletion of the species and the degradation of the ecosystem. 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. A first priority is to establish the problem of disappearing species and threatened ecosystems on political agendas as a major economic and resource issue.

Governments can stem the destruction of tropical forests and other reservoirs of biological diversity while developing them economically. 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. But over the long term the opportunities for development will be enhanced. International development agencies should therefore give
comprehensive and systematic attention to the problems and opportunities of species conservation.

**Chapter 7** deals with the demand for efficiency of energy which is imperative for the sustainable model of growth. 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. Modern appliances can be redesigned to deliver the same amounts of energy-services with only two-thirds or even one-half of the primary energy inputs needed to run traditional equipment.

**Chapter 8** deals with the challenge of achieving efficient industrialization throughout the world in every economy where more can be produced using less resources. 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. 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.

**Chapter 9** deals with the problem of the change in the living pattern due to urbanization and the problems faced due to it. The commission foresaw that by the turn of the century, almost half of humanity will live in cities; the world of the 21st century will be a largely urban world. Between 1985 and the year 2000, Third World cities could grow by another three-quarters of a billion people. This suggests that the developing world must, over the next few years, increase by 65 per cent its capacity to produce and manage its urban infrastructure, services, and shelter merely to maintain today's often extremely inadequate conditions.

**Part III: Our Common Endeavours**

This part of the report provides the measures recommended by the commission in order to overcome the challenges and meet the common concerns. The commission has broadly called for a coordinated action of all the economies. It suggests to forego the traditional system of
sovereignty and to come forward for sharing responsibility of the common areas. The coordinated action will inculcate the responsibility among the industrialised to judiciously use the resources. Further, it will encourage the industrialised to assist the developing economies to follow sustainable model of growth. This part lays down the proposed endeavours in chapters 10 to 12.

**Chapter 10** discusses about the need to manage the global commons. 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.

**Chapter 12** deals with the need to reconsider the issues of peace, security vis-a-vis environment and development. Among the dangers facing the environment, the possibility of nuclear war is undoubtedly the gravest. Certain aspects of the issues of peace and security bear directly upon the concept of sustainable development. The whole notion of security as traditionally understood in terms of political and military threats to national sovereignty - must be expanded to include the growing impacts of environmental stress - locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. There are no military solutions to 'environmental insecurity'.

**Chapter 13** calls for a common action plan for institutional and legal changes. The Report that follows contains throughout many specific recommendations for institutional and legal change. 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. His Commission has been careful to base our recommendations on the realities of present institutions, on what can and must be accomplished today. But to keep options open for future generations, the present generation must begin now, and begin together. First and foremost, this Commission has been concerned with people - of all countries and all walks of life. And it is to people that we address our report. The changes in human attitudes that we call for depend on a vast campaign of education, debate, and public participation. This campaign must start now if sustainable human progress is to be achieved.
4. CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE BRUNDTLAND REPORT

Three Pillars of Sustainable Development

The three pillars of sustainability are a powerful tool for defining the complete sustainability problem. This consists of at least the economic, social, and environmental pillars. If anyone pillar is weak then the system as a whole is unsustainable.

- Social Sustainability- Social Sustainability is the ability of a social system, such as a country, family, or organization, to function at a defined level of social wellbeing and harmony indefinitely. Problems like war, endemic poverty, widespread injustice, and low education rates are symptoms a system is socially unsustainable.

- Environmental Sustainability- Environmental Sustainability is the ability of the environment to support a defined level of environmental quality and natural resource extraction rates indefinitely. This is the world's biggest actual problem, though since the consequences of not solving the problem now are delayed, the problem receives too low a priority to solve.

- Economic Sustainability- Economic Sustainability is the ability of an economy to support a defined level of economic production indefinitely. Since the Great Recession of 2008 this is the world's biggest apparent problem, which endangers progress on the environmental sustainability problem.

Most national and international problem solving efforts focus on only one pillar at a time. For example, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), the environmental protection agencies (EPA) of many nations, and environmental NGOs focus on the environmental pillar. The World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) focus mostly on economic growth, thought the OECD gives some attention to social sustainability, like war reduction and justice. The United Nations attempts to strengthen all three pillars, but due to its consensual decision making process and small budget has minor impact. The United Nations focuses mostly on the economic pillar, since economic growth is what most of its members want most, especially developing nations.

This leaves a void. No powerful international organization is working on the sustainability
problem as a whole, which would include all three pillars. The social pillar is critical too. Once a war breaks out environmental sustainability has zero priority. If a nation lives in dire poverty, the environment is pillaged with little thought for the future. Therefore solutions to the sustainability problem must include making all three pillars sustainable.\textsuperscript{10}

**Need for sustainable human development**

Sustainable development quoted from Our Common Future, also known as the Brundtland Report: "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.\textsuperscript{11}

The world must quickly design strategies that will allow nations to move from their present, often destructive, processes of growth and development onto sustainable development paths. This will require policy changes in all countries, with respect both to their own development and to their impacts on other nations' development possibilities. Critical objectives for environment and development policies that follow from the concept of sustainable development include:

- reviving growth;
- changing the quality of growth;
- meeting essential needs for jobs, food, energy, water, and sanitation;
- ensuring a sustainable level of population;
- conserving and enhancing the resource base;
- reorienting technology and managing risk; and
- Merging environment and economics in decision making.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} URL: http://www.thwink.org/sustain/glossary/ThreePillarsOfSustainability.htm.
\textsuperscript{11} URL: http://www.iisd.org/sd/#one
\textsuperscript{12} URL: http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm#. 
1. **Reviving Growth**- Development that is sustainable has to address the problem of the large number of people who live in absolute poverty - that is, who are unable to satisfy even the most basic of their needs. Poverty reduces people's capacity to use resources in a sustainable manner; it intensifies pressure on the environment. Growth must be revived in developing countries because that is where the links between economic growth, the alleviation of poverty, and environmental conditions operate most directly. Yet developing countries are part of an interdependent world economy; their prospects also depend on the levels and patterns of growth in industrialized nations. The medium-term prospects for industrial countries are for growth of 3-4 per cent, the minimum that international financial institutions consider necessary if these countries are going to play a part in expanding the world economy. Such growth rates could be environmentally sustainable if industrialized nations can continue the recent shifts in the content of their growth towards less material- and energy-intensive activities and the improvement of their efficiency in using materials and energy.\(^{13}\)

2. **Changing the quality of growth**- Sustainable development involves more than growth. It requires a change in the content of growth, to make it less material- and energy-intensive and more equitable in its impact. These changes are required in all countries as part of a package of measures to maintain the stock of ecological capital, to improve the distribution of income, and to reduce the degree of vulnerability to economic crises. The process of economic development must be more soundly based upon the realities of the stock of capital that sustains it. This is rarely done in either developed or developing countries.\(^{14}\)

3. **Meeting essential needs**- The principal development challenge is to meet the needs and aspirations of an expanding developing world population. The most basic of all needs is for a livelihood: that is, employment. Between 1985 and 2000 the labor force in developing countries will increase by nearly 800 million, and new livelihood opportunities will have to be generated for 60 million persons every year. The pace and pattern of economic development have to generate sustainable work opportunities on this scale and

\(^{13}\) UNCTAD, Handbook of International Trade and Development Statistics 1985 Supplement (New York: 1985  
at a level of productivity that would enable poor households to meet minimum consumption standards. Energy is another essential human need, one that cannot be universally met unless energy consumption patterns change. The most urgent problem is the requirements of poor Third World households, which depend mainly on fuel wood.15

4. Ensuring a sustainable level of population. The sustainability of development is intimately linked to the dynamics of population growth. Nonetheless, sustainable development can be pursued more easily when population size is stabilized at a level consistent with the productive capacity of the ecosystem. Birth rates declined in industrial countries largely because of economic and social development. Rising levels of income and urbanization and the changing role of women all played important roles. Similar processes are now at work in developing countries. Population growth in developing countries will remain unevenly distributed between rural and urban areas.16 Developing-country cities are growing much faster than the capacity of authorities to cope. Shortages of housing, water, sanitation, and mass transit are widespread. A growing proportion of city-dwellers live in slums and shanty towns, many of them exposed to air and water pollution and to industrial and natural hazards. Further deterioration is likely, given that most urban growth will take place in the largest cities. Thus more manageable cities may be the principal gain from slower rates of population growth. Urbanization is itself part of the development process.17

5. Conserving and enhancing the resource base. If needs are to be met on a sustainable basis the Earth's natural resource base must be conserved and enhanced. Pressure on resources increases when people lack alternatives. Development policies must widen people's options for earning a sustainable livelihood. The conservation of agricultural resources is an urgent task because in many parts of the world cultivation has already been extended to marginal lands, and fishery and forestry resources have been overexploited. These resources must be conserved and enhanced to meet the needs of growing populations.18 The prevention and reduction of air and water pollution will remain a

critical task of resource conservation. Air and water quality come under pressure from such activities as fertilizer and pesticide use, urban sewage, fossil fuel burning, the use of certain chemicals, and various other industrial activities.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Burgeoning levels of energy consumption, enhanced levels of ecological degradation, a growing public mistrust of science, vast inequalities in economic opportunities both within and across societies, and a fractured set of institutional arrangements for global environmental governance; all represent seemingly insurmountable obstacles to a move towards sustainability.

During the nearly 20 years since Brundtland, the world is a vastly different place, in part because of Brundtland but largely because of changes that were difficult to perceive at the time Our Common Future was produced. While many have long complained that SD is difficult to define, our knowledge of what sustainability means has increased considerably, while it is development that has in many ways become more difficult to define.

In addition, the challenges of both sustainability and development are more difficult than understood at the time of Brundtland because of several interrelated phenomena. First, science has better documented ecological destruction (e.g., the likely impacts of climate change, burgeoning losses of biodiversity) and it is greater than foreseen. Second, Brundtland assumed equity problems could and would be solved by growth while the net growth since Brundtland has largely been accompanied by increased inequity. Third, increased economic and thereby ecological interconnectivity, a simultaneous decrease in the power of national sovereignty, and general turbulence in global order mean global solutions are both increasingly necessary and increasingly difficult to come by.

As anyone working or interested in environment and development will know, the most often cited definition of sustainable development is the one given in the 1987 report Our Common Future, produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development (more commonly known as the Brundtland Report, after the chair of the Commission, Gro Harlem Brundtland):

“Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. It is the most common definition used. It certainly has its limitations, however. Critics ask what ‘needs’ are and argue that the concept of sustainable development merely supports economic growth without challenging our Western environment-destroying way of life.

There are, of course, many other definitions of sustainable development. Most recently, the UNDP’s *Human Development Report 2011*, released on 2 November, suggested that a new concept of “sustainable human development” is needed. This new concept is intended to address some of the criticisms of the concept of sustainable development, taking out reference to needs, and bringing in the concept of freedom. The report defines sustainable human development as:

“The expansion of the substantive freedoms of people today while making reasonable efforts to avoid seriously compromising those of future generations”.

This does sound rather noble: who could argue against expanding substantive freedoms? But does the concept of sustainable development really need revisiting at all? Bringing in the word ‘human’ could add yet more confusion and discussion over the plethora of concepts and definitions within the broad area of environment and development.

It is the intergenerational dimension of the definition that really causes concern. The report claims to adopt a ‘strong’ sustainability approach, which does not advocate substitution between different forms of capital, and argues that some forms of natural capital must be preserved. Indeed, it goes on to review evidence for the depletion and degradation of natural resources, most of which would be considered as un-substitutable.

A ‘strong’ sustainability approach is not, however, reflected in its definition of sustainable human development. The definition instead lacks assertiveness in its language, which is unhelpful, given the criticisms made of sustainable development, that it is a vague concept meaning different things to different people. The suggestion that ‘reasonable efforts’ should be made does not reflect the implied urgency of the review of trends in sustainability in the report, and it seems that the ‘substantive freedoms’ of future generations may be compromised, as long as it is not to a serious level. A truly strong sustainability approach would surely want to set the bar higher than such a definition suggests.
The concept of sustainable development may be far from ideal, and certainly there are concerns about how it is used at times to justify all sorts of measures and initiatives that are far from sustainable as many would understand the term. However, it may well be unhelpful to bring in new concepts and definitions. Much more effort is surely needed to ensure that the concept of sustainable development, which is globally well-known, is acted on in a much more assertive way in the face of sustained global inequalities, environmental devastation and human-induced climate change.