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Taking Stock of Sustainable Development at 20: What We Have Accomplished and What Comes Next?

*Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland**

Good morning to all of you. It's nice to be able to be with you for this important event. I have been asked to reflect a little on the last 20 years, and what we thought as we worked on the Commission on Environment and Development, back a quarter-century ago.

First of all, when that Commission was needed, it was because there were really changing trends globally. There were environmental concerns, population pressures, and increasing challenges with regard to disparities between different groups of countries. This was certainly true as between the North and the South, and there were many differing views on what was necessary to face these new threats. So, basically, we had a very broad and challenging mandate to deal with.

After having analyzed many sectors across the board, from energy, population, industry, agriculture, and all of the major economic sectors, and assessing how they affected the environment, we concluded that change was of the essence. We concluded that we had to face the future trends and challenges together because there was no alternative in a world that was increasingly interdependent. It was not possible to argue that the developing world, the poor countries, would have to stop their development because we had already been polluting the world, the atmosphere, the water, and that now other countries that were poorer than us couldn't do the same.

This was true; the analysis was true that we couldn't all be doing what the OECD countries had already been doing for a century or more. But it was not possible to tell the developing world, you know, you have to stop looking for prosperity and increasing your economic situation to bring your populations out of poverty. So there was no other solution than to combine our efforts to overcome poverty, and to protect the environment, in order to have a sustainable solution.

Now, this Report was well-received, I think, due to the way we worked. We visited all regions of the world, we had public hearings, and we reached out to the scientific community around the world and asked for input to our analysis in a way that hadn't happened in former U.N. reports in the same way. For this it was well-received. And, of course, it was quite interesting that only five years

* The following article is a transcription of Dr. Brundtland's verbal remarks that were delivered via video recording at the University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law, November 17, 2007. Dr. Brundtland is a Norwegian politician, diplomat, physician, and an international leader in sustainable development and public health. She is a former Prime Minister of Norway, and has served as the Director General of the World Health Organization. She is perhaps best known for her work on the Brundtland Commission, which essentially coined the term "sustainable development." She now serves as a Special Envoy on Climate Change for the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. In 2008 she became the recipient of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation Medal in Architecture.

after we had presented the Report, the world went to Rio for the Earth Summit. This was one of our recommendations—that the world really needed five years to take stock and to see that we were all moving in the right direction on dealing with the trends that in fact were dramatic, such as increasing desertification, lack of water, poverty, and increasing environmental challenges and concerns.

Now, the poor countries asked for, and they got, what we had advised. We found we needed to support development, and development patterns, that were sustainable in the developing world, otherwise it would not be possible to take care of the environment. So Agenda 21 took form in the preparation for and during the Rio convention itself. We also had the Climate Convention. It was, I think, a surprise to many that the world in fact agreed on the Climate Convention only five years after our Report had been issued. I had called for that Convention in 1988 in Toronto because, at that time, we were already sure that we had a problem with regard to global warming and climate change. It was early days, and the scientific consensus was building, and the analysis that started around that time, just before I called for a climate convention, is what today is called the IPCC that has, together with Al Gore, received the Nobel Peace Prize in November 2007. So it illustrates this trend: change can happen if it is done in a systematic way and if we are working together to analyze the issues and to get ready for action.

You can say that a lot of time has been lost, or that more action should have been taken before, but today, I believe that the world is ready to understand and to really start doing more. This is why the Secretary General of the United Nations called for a high level meeting in September of this year—to have the world leaders come together and address climate change as an urgent global issue. It is not sufficient to have the Ministers of Environment deal with this, because they are not the major players in most of the governments of the world. You need the attention of the presidents, the prime ministers, and the finance ministers because this is an economic issue, a security issue, and not simply an environmental issue alone.

So today, we are faced with the consequences of inaction. But we are also in a situation where knowledge has grown and where there is no way to refuse to admit that science has spoken. There is no more doubt around the issue, and now it is up to the populations and the politicians they elect to do what is necessary for the future.

Just to be sure that we are aware that a lot has happened over these 20 years, it's not just doom and gloom and we have done nothing. In many parts of the world big cities are livable because air pollution standards have been set, the car park has been changed, and burning coal with tall stacks is prohibited in many city environments around the world. Many things have happened that have improved the environment. We have, for example, the Montreal Protocol, which shows that the world has been able to agree to protect the ozone layer.

But now, the next step is bigger. It has to do with energy, economy and the future. But it is doable. I know, as a Norwegian Prime Minister, how tough it was

to introduce a CO₂ tax on the Norwegian continental shelf. We did that back in 1990 to the surprise of the world and to the shock of other oil exporting nations. Why would I do such a thing? To kind of hurt a big part of the Norwegian economy? It was necessary, but the Norwegian economy has not been suffering from this. And, the Norwegian continental shelf now has only one-third of the CO₂ emissions than the global average with regard to the extraction of oil and gas. The emissions are, in fact, only half of the emissions of the rest of the North-Sea states.

So, when you put pressure, and when you put in economic mechanisms, things change and industry finds solutions to reduce their tax burden. In that way you can promote change and sustainable development. But we must never forget the poor and the necessity of overcoming poverty. So now with climate change as well, adaptation and support for poor nations, so that they don't have to go through the polluting stages that we have been through, is of the essence. This will be a challenge to the negotiations that will be launched this fall in December in Bali, but I am certain it is doable.

Thank you very much and have a nice conference.

