

# Brundtland Report

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The Brundtland Report, or Our Common Future, is the report made by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. It is often called the Brundtland report after the chairperson of the commission, the then Prime Minister of Norway, Mrs Gro Harlem Brundtland. The report is one of the seminal environmental documents of the 20th century. It is representative of the growing global awareness in the second half of the century of the enormous environmental problems facing the planet, and of a growing shift towards global environmental action. As the report observes, humankind saw the earth from space for the first time only a few decades ago, and yet this has had a profound impact on the way in which we perceive the earth and our place on it.

The Commission's brief was to re-examine the critical environment and development problems on the planet and to formulate realistic proposals to solve them; to create a 'global agenda for change'. It was to work within the principle of Environmentally Sustainable Development (ESD). The report represents a collective call to action, involving all nation states as participants in finding solutions to the 'tragedy of the commons'. In the words of Brundtland, one of its goals was:

*"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 of the world community." (Brundtland 1987:ix).*

The report approaches the environmental and development issues which were (and still are) facing the world as one common challenge, to be solved by collective multilateral action rather than through the pursuit of national self-interest. It examines population and human resources, food security, species and ecosystems, energy, industry, and 'the urban challenge' of humans in their built environment. Importantly, it approaches these common concerns with a holistic perspective. For example, the report illustrates how the problems of poverty and population are interconnected. By examining the interactions between the problems facing the world, the report develops common approaches to peace, security, development and the environment.

The report makes institutional and legal recommendations for change in order to confront common global problems. Critically amongst these recommendations is the call for the development and expansion of international institutions for co-operation, and legal mechanisms to confront common concerns. The report was effectively calling for international action on issues of common concern. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the report called for increased co-operation with industry.

The Brundtland report has often been subject to criticism, on the grounds that many of its 'forecasts' did not come true. However such criticisms are perhaps missing the significance of the report and the fact that despite inaccuracies in forecasting, the Brundtland report's premise of the need for global environmental action has not been invalidated. The Brundtland report must, as with any other historical document, be seen as a product of its time. Viewed in the historical context of the late 1980's, the Brundtland report can be viewed as a landmark document in terms of furthering environmentalism in the following decades. Tangible results have flowed from the Brundtland report, such as the emergence of International Agreements such as the Montreal and Kyoto Protocols, and Agenda 21, which further enshrined the concept of environmentally sustainable development.

## Further Reading

Brundtland, G (ed) (1987). Our Common Future: The World Commission on Environment and Development, Oxford: Oxford University Press.