

Ruud Lubbers, The Netherlands. A thematic essay on the precautionary approach and globalization as they relate to Principle 6

The Shift from Economy to Ecology



Ruud Lubbers played a leadership role in the Earth Charter. He is an active Steering Committee member. Ruud Lubbers is an economist and former Minister for Economic Affairs (1973-1977) in The Netherlands, and from 1982 to 1994, he served three terms as Prime Minister. Since then, he was Professor of Globalization at the Catholic University of Brabant and visiting Professor at the Kennedy School for Government at Harvard University, USA. He was president of World Wildlife Fund. Most recently, Ruud Lubbers was the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2001-2005).

In the 1960s I lived, as I do now, near the river Maas in my hometown of Rotterdam. Its port became one of the biggest in the world supplying and exporting products to and from the European heartland to the world. Around it the chemical industry was developing quickly. The Netherlands was prospering, but I came to realize that this had its costs. The neighborhood was rapidly changing. In my own youth, I saw foxes in the meadows; now there were not even fish in the river any more. I would play in the garden with my young children where we could smell the chemicals and draw with our fingers in black dust on the table. The river was so polluted that one could develop photos in it!

This is where I started to worry, as a young father and as a businessman. The city did economically well and was expanding with the growth of international trade, but something had to change in its environmental impact. My reading in 1971 of the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* strengthened my ideas. The report focused on global trends and saw economy and ecology in a greater, overarching perspective. It was an extrapolation of worrisome trends – worrisome for nature and, therefore, for humankind. Here, in retrospect, were already the seeds for my intellectual development towards the 1990s, my transformation from “economy” to “ecology,” from the short-term to the long-term.

If the Earth Charter is about the paradigm-shift from economy to ecology, the introduction and application of the precautionary principle is an important tool and proof of that transition. If one is wondering about the pros and cons of substantially increasing the application of an existing technology, or of applying a new technology, one normally makes an assessment of the environmental impact and the risks in relation to nature. Doing so, one has to work with a calculation of risks. Sometimes it is very clear that certain environmental impacts are not acceptable at all; sometimes it is clear that those impacts are no problem at all.

But in many other cases, it is more complicated. There is a risk and one starts to quantify the risk. The economist tends to make a plea for a calculation to see if the benefit merits the risk. In doing so the economist “discounts” benefits and risks, taking into account the time factor. A risk after hundreds of thousands of years is for an economist almost zero. For an ecologist it is different. He does not “discount” risks. Almost on the contrary, the future – our responsibility vis à vis generations to come – is at least as important as the actual. And the actual negative impact on environment and nature has to be balanced against the capacity of new technologies to increase consumption.

As an economist, your work is to produce something because you have scarce capital, so you work it into an efficiency of capital. In ecology, it is the other way around: you don't look for the short term, you look for the long-term. So to simplify, ecology is long-term, economy is short-term. Here again, economists tend to prioritize the increase of the economy and ecologists tend to prioritize the protection of environment and nature.

To strengthen the ecological dimension in calculating such risks, one can introduce the precautionary principle. It advises us to “Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach” (Principle 6). Further, it calls upon us to “Ensure that decision-making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities” (Subprinciple 6.c).

Principle 6. Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.

If there is uncertainty in relation to the ecological impact of certain projects, the precautionary principle calls upon one to err on the safe side, to abstain from actions or projects, from new technologies if one is not sure. We have a proverb in the Dutch language, “In geval van twijfel steek [de straat] niet over” that says, “In case you are not sure, do not cross a street.”

When I became Economy Minister in the Netherlands in 1973 and developed a policy of “selective economic growth,” I tried to solve the great intrinsic dilemma of economic growth: how can it be made compatible with the environment?

Much later, the outcome of the Rio Summit became the agenda for the twenty-first century. It laid the foundations for the Earth Charter. And for me, it was the start of a new phase in my thinking, already sown in the decades before – an intellectual transformation from economy to ecology, from the short-term to the long-term, from the confrontation inherent to globalization and its rebounds, to the harmony of seeing the planet as a whole. This reflection process deepened a few years later, after I left my political office in 1994.

I started to think about an important new trend that came up those days – globalization. With its many faces and interpretations, globalization became to be known as such only after the demise of the Soviet Union, in 1989. In the same period, it came to a series of global summits: on women (Beijing), on population and reproductive health (Cairo), on social development (Copenhagen) and, of course, the first one, the Earth Summit in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. All these summits exemplified the global interest for global issues and were themselves the very expression of globalization – not only governments gathered there, but, even more, the non governmental organizations (NGOs). And indeed, all these summits produced global commitments as if we were becoming more “one.”

The first five years of the new millennium showed again a diverse picture from the global point of view. On the one hand, we saw the Millennium Declaration, a powerful commitment of the United Nations to the Millennium Development Goals, and a successful Monterrey Summit; on the other hand, the attack on September 11, 2001 in New York and a very visible Al Qaeda. The world, and, in particular, its lead country, the USA, became obsessed by “security” concerns. By choosing a classic, ideological strategy – a preventive strike against a rogue nation because of the risk of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of the axis of evil – the Bush administration disqualified the United Nations as the global guardian of security. At the same time, the struggle of Islam with modernity, in particular in the homelands of the Moslems, coincided unfortunately with two “globalizing” dimensions. First, there is the perception that globalization and Americanization threatens Islam and the Islamic way of life. And second, there is the perception that America protects corruptive leadership in the Islamic world. In addition to this, there is the on-going degradation of the United

Nations as a producer and protagonist of justice by the humiliating lack of capacity to perform in the conflict between Israel and Palestine, between Jews and Palestinians. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ mandate for the Palestinian victims of violence and persecution has existed for fifty-five years; and there is no doubt in the hearts and minds of Moslems that this is the proof of ongoing injustice and double standards.

In these senses, globalization, and anti-globalization or anti-Americanism, are the opposite of everything the Earth Charter stands for – the interconnectedness of people and peoples, a common future, with sustainable development, with harmony. Instead, globalization, in its success and its rebound, seems to inflict the contrary – it divides peoples.

In the meantime, the need for a global answer is more urgent than ever. This answer is not only on the level of summits or concrete measures and negotiations. It goes deeper. To illustrate this, I go back to the beginning of the 1990s. I had, after twelve years being prime minister in the Netherlands, more time to reflect. The concept of inclusivity – to include people, to include dimensions of life – grew more important to me. I started to understand the call for a paradigm shift, which was put forward by NGO’s at the Rio Summit.

An important influence in this transformation was my acquaintance with the way indigenous people look at life. Indigenous people succeeded in Rio to introduce two fundamentals that go beyond good environmental policies reducing and controlling emissions. The notion of preventing harm, of thinking of future generations, is one fundamental. The second fundamental that found ground in Rio was the positioning of the “indigenous” way of relating to nature – a relationship of “awe.” While the Enlightenment resulted in more and more exploitation and plundering of Earth, the indigenous – economically at the lowest level – had totally different concepts. They celebrate nature. They have a different concept of time. They think about harmony, about Mother Earth, respect, and equity. These fundamentals are, with many other insights, integrated in the Earth Charter. To handle the great challenges and responsibilities we have towards Earth and to counter the negative globalization trends, we can make full use of the Earth Charter. The civil society of the globalizing world, “we the people” need a constitution – a document describing the values to be respected and to be pursued. The Earth Charter gives us a holistic, comprehensive, inclusive constitution. ●