

Welcome to Turning Conscience Into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars, and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education, and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire informed action.

Anyone who works in the field of sustainable development must have heard of the Brundtland Commission or the Brundtland Report, which is a way to refer to the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development and the report Our Common Future, that was launched in 1987.

Well, today I have the honor and the pleasure to have a conversation with Gro Harlem Brundtland, who chaired this world commission, known as the Brundtland Commission. Mrs. Brundtland served three terms as Prime Minister of Norway and was the Director General of the World Health Organization from 1998 to the year 2003. So I really appreciate your time, Mrs. Gro Brundtland, for joining me here today. I have been following your work and I am a great admirer of the work you have done. And of course, we have been working with sustainability for the past 30 years.

So my first question to you is, the concept of sustainability implies expanding our sense of responsibility with the well-being of present and future generations. This is related to intergenerational justice, intergenerational equity and collaboration. So can you speak to that and what does that mean in theory and practice from your perspective in terms of sustainability?

I think this is maybe, I mean, one of the most fundamental observations that my commission made and made very clear in a way that was radical and new to people who read our report and heard about our report and was informed about it.

The observation that for the first time in human history, we who live now on Earth have to have and are going to have impact which are irreversible in a different way than future generations have had. Every generation has, I think, been aware in their minds that we leave to the next generation something that is better than we started with. This is in every culture across the world, I think this is the normal way of thinking in human family life. However, because of the damage of the sum of our anthropogenic footprint, which then at some time in the last century became too much to be able to continue and it would set permanent negatives which would undermine the ability for future generations to make their own choices.

We would have done permanent damage. This, for that generation that I belong to, you are younger than me, but in my generation, this was something that we needed in the 60s and 70s already to start realizing and of course our book came in 87 and for many people became a dramatic message. They had not thought about it in those terms before, which means that our duty to protect future generations' ability to make their choices and to live a healthy and fruitful life depends on what we do and how we change our patterns of living today.

This observation was fundamental and new to most people and I think was one of the reasons why the report really caught fire and spread across the world the way it did. Of course that's one important aspect, the intergenerational perspective and the obligations moral and otherwise that puts on our generations that are alive today. The other of course is that it's part of the same thing that all the different changes, pollutions, chemicals, which are not disappearing but staying around us, that this is something that we cannot easily get rid of because this is how all generations before us thought, whatever they pollute, whatever they leave behind, they can put earth above it, they can put it into the ocean, they can get rid of it and they believe it's gone, which is not the case. So this is fundamental, yes.

So the whole idea of responsibility is so strongly embedded in the notion of sustainability that the Brundtland Commission reports highly. So intergenerational responsibility, yes. It's key in addition to everything else which has to do with present generations as well.

So the Brundtland Commission met and then launched that very important report that is still nowadays after over 30 years is making a big impact. Did your vision of sustainability changed over the years, over the past 30 years? How did it change if it did?

Well, I have given up now to correct people who use the word sustainability. You did it now. It happens all over the world and in your case, it just means sustainable development. It's griefer, so you use it. But what I saw some years ago or 10, 15 years ago was that in the business community, when they started taking on board some of these messages and insights because they realized they had to for public consumption. And also, I mean, also because many business leaders, of course, understood that they had a responsibility, but it was also used to make nicer their own profile. And then you had sustainability used everywhere.

And they didn't always follow the principles and the thinking and the philosophy. In the definition of sustainable development, which but I have given it up because I think the world has moved on. It has taken on the word sustainability to seriously mean sustainable development. So I mean, it's just that is how language changes, you know. Yes, but I have not changed my own thinking, vision and understanding of the analysis we made back in 1980s and the conclusions and recommendations we made. So what is interesting to me is when you read my forward, our summary, every chapter in that book, it's really foresight. And I could repeat it if I wanted, I could make a lecture or a speech today, drawing only from language and observations from that report, which is really interesting. And of course, all over the world, I have met students, I have met old people, professors, people who already have gray hair and have worked for decades, and also very young children, they have the book in their bookcase and they know about it and they have read it. So it is quite impressive to see that a report or a book like this can have really a thorough breakthrough internationally.

It's amazing to see the impact of the Brundtland Commission report, still nowadays, and the way in which it was articulated, the priorities, back then, is still the priorities.

But having said that, I haven't changed my basic thinking, analysis, and vision and conclusions. However, because technological changes happen, things that we didn't know

even in the 80s, and the world has changed in so many ways, there are many implications of all that, of the thinking, of the analysis, and what it means that you have to do in practical terms, which have been added to the history of what we need to do.

So as we have moved on and pursued over those last 30 years or more, both towards sustainable development goals and towards the Paris Agreement on climate, it all, of course, language and examples, etc., have been informed by new observations, but they have only added to the substance of what we said, not really departed in any way from the messages.

New ideas have been added, but not changed the core concept. Absolutely, yes. I agree, that's very good and well said. Now, you are also, in addition to being the leader of Norway, but also of the Brundtland Commission, you are also the former head of WHO, the World Health Organization. And probably more than ever this year, we can see this close relationship between human health, animal health, and our relationship with nature. How do you see this challenge in the current times, the relationship of human health, animal health, and how we relate with nature?

Well, I think it's part of that broad understanding of how everything is linked to everything else. And from the beginning, and I use that, once I said that sentence in the Norwegian Parliament, when you had a Prime Minister's question time, because an opposition leader was pushing, asking me and repeating questions about what is the highest priority in the Brundtland Report.

He tried to have me somehow corner into taking up one issue among the hundreds which are addressed and analyzed in our report, our common future. And in frustration at the end, when I had given a number of answers about several important aspects, which add up to something which is meaningful, I said, why can't you give me a right answer about what is most important? He said, you know. And I said, you know why? Because everything is linked to everything else. So that was, you know, interesting. At that time, when I said that, of course, led by opposition journalists, they were making fun of what the Prime Minister had said. You know, she didn't want to respond to the question from the opposition leader. She was evasive. And, you know, that became kind of the story at that time. And then many years pass. And like this happened in the 80s, I mean, you know, maybe early 90s, it happened. But about 15 years, 10, 15 years ago, people started quoting it as deep wisdom. And I have, therefore, in many speeches, explained and told that story, because it really illustrates how the knowledge level and the awareness was at a different stage, back in the early 90s, about what this is about. And which made it possible for somebody in a position to me to make fun of me, while 10, 15, 20 years later, 20, like 2005 or 10, it was seen to be intelligent and very wise. Now, because then, by then, these linkages had become something that many more people understood and had taken on board. So to me, this is one story that illustrates that all those things have been slow, too slow. There has been fundamental change in the way many people understand our life and its relationship to planet earth.

Now, then, I mean, to animal and human health and nature, what has happened within the public health community and global health community, broadly speaking, is that new concepts have been created to help people understand the fundamental nature of these

linkages, one health, including human health, animal health, nature's health. So you have coalitions, you have partnerships, alliances, working for one health perspective. And this is one of the many consequences of this kind of thinking. And now, of course, with the COVID-19 raging around the world, these alliances that work on the one health perspective have increased attention to their messages, naturally. I was today in a video conference with ministers and public health experts, etc., where one of the panelists in my panel focused solely in his intervention on virology and why we need to create a network across the world, country-based, but totally global, to research and study and register and really pursue all the millions of viruses, because some of them are different, potentially more dangerous. They can move between animals, they can move from certain animals directly to people. He was making the point, we know much less than we could know about something that is going to be a problem, a challenge for humanity for decades to come, and we need to prepare better, even on that aspect of the story.

Yeah, it's a very interesting point that I think this year we really felt how vulnerable we are as humans and how interrelated we are in terms of nature and human and animal health, indeed. May I ask you, what do you feel are the ethical challenges that underpin the sustainability challenges?

Well, I mean, we have talked about the definition itself, the responsibility for future generations, not only for our own generations living today. So the ethical question is how we are all in this together, which means that every human being has a responsibility ethically based, but of course, depending on who that person is, what the opportunity is, what that lifestyle is, what that person can contribute, we all have different possibilities to contribute to the solutions and to be part of the solution. But we are all part of the solution for the future.

And democracy, participation, the gender perspective, we are all in this, we are all equal, as dignity as human beings. The human rights aspects of it all has been there from the beginning, and so again, that is the ethical basis that the responsibility to take care of humanity, each one in a human rights perspective, and then how can you contribute is part of what I see as the ethical challenge. It's not as if you can, nobody can point upwards, not to God, that's not sufficient, he will not solve it alone, whoever you believe in, and you cannot point upwards to your leaders, whether they are local, national or global, and say to yourself, these leaders have the responsibility, because we all live in a partnership, and everyone has a voice, everyone has the duty to do something to improve the condition, and everyone, now we just had an American election, everyone in my opinion has the duty to vote, if they are able to post-vote, or to come to the place where votes are given, you know, if you are young or old, if you have the right to vote in any society, you should, because otherwise you have not done a basic part of your own duty, to be part of what changes the world and how political decisions define the path that we move forward on, so that's, I often said to young students when I have given speeches or lectures, anyone here who didn't vote in the last election, and they don't dare to put up their hands of course, but I know there will be a number of them, certainly in the US, where 50% vote, this is not, I mean this is democracy, and that has now become threatened in another way in the last 5-10 years, than we have ever seen, with populism, with fake news, and so it is even more important to really uphold the value of democracy, and that we are all responsible, we are all participants in shaping our future.

Absolutely, so in order to make sustainable development happen, leadership is very important, but not any kind of leadership, you know, it's ethical and visionary, responsible leadership is urgently needed, therefore engaging a new generation of young leaders, empowering this new generation of young leaders is of most importance, to move forward in this quest of sustainable development. Can you share your thoughts in your work, you have done some work on engaging young leaders, can you share your thoughts on the importance of engaging and empowering young leaders for sustainable development?

Yeah, because young people are at an age and a stage in their life where they establish and further their own personality, their own priorities, the way they see themselves and society around them, the way they identify what am I, what should I do with my life, how can I contribute, all of these things happen in young people's minds and lives and hearts, and so which is why it's important even before student life, I mean at primary school and high school time is very important for young people too, because they depend on what kind of home they come from, what kinds of values have they been kind of grown up with or been taught, and so at certainly at university, college and university level generally, you really need to be sure that you reach all these young people with a number of observations and facts about where we are in history and what we are dependent on everyone to try to contribute to, so this is why of course it's very satisfying in many ways to be able to reach young minds. Now the elders which I am part of, we have had direct campaigns and work with young people and at one stage before the Rio Plus 20, we had youngers and elders debating sustainable development and climate and we invited young people to come with Mary, Robinson and me to Rio in 2012, where also the roots of the sustainable development goals were launched and were decided upon as 30 countries agreed to start that process in 2012.

Correct, I followed that and I really admire your leadership and your work in that movement and effort with the elders, thank you so much, really my appreciation for that. Now in the Brundtland commission report, our common feature, there was a strong emphasis on the importance for a new charter that could set the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a new charter to guide state behavior in the transition to sustainable development, so that idea was kind of the beginning of the idea of the Earth Charter with the skull of the parental commission and it was taken to the earth summit process, it was part of their negotiations of the preparatory process during the earth summit and as you know Morris Strong, Ruth Lubbers, Jim McNeil, Mohamed Shannoun were all in a way or another involved in your work with the Brundtland Commission, they took the leadership in moving forward with this idea into to develop the Earth Charter and so my question to you is how do you think is the importance for the global community to have such a shared vision of values and principles for sustainable development, values and principles for a nurse or planetary ethic and how do you think the Earth Charter can be used as an useful instrument, as an ethical reference when instrument in sustainable development?

I think this is one of the many initiatives and alliances, you know, promotions of important ideas that have been pursued after our report came through to Rio and then onwards until today and it has been I think a quite successful one of those that people have heard of that people refer to and so in a way it's a kind of the ambition of the Earth Charter to be a kind of parallel to the human rights charter, it's a those are fundamental and the human

rights charter is based in the United Nations and go back to the 40s of course and has been celebrated, you know, we have had the anniversaries and so on and but so because the human rights aspect was the observation of intergenerational responsibility was not there in the minds of those who wrote and defined and agreed on the human rights charter and so we needed something which is more, as we expand into nature and to all the observations that we are now aware of so in that sense, you know, it's an addition to basic philosophical and ethical agreements that should be able to connect us across the world.

Now of course when you look at the sustainable development goals and you look at the Earth Charter, it carries when you look at the Earth Charter and you try to look, is it covered, is all of that covered in the sustainable development goals, the 17, yes major, you know, in a major way it certainly is so it means that the kind of thinking which is in the Earth Charter and the kind of thinking that then has followed us and been in the dialogues and discussions between countries even in the process from 2012 to 2015 when the sustainable development goals were made, clearly the kinds of philosophy and ethical considerations in the Earth Charter has been moved into the sustainable development goals in a quite a fundamental way which illustrates also that there is certainly the same thinking, core values and spreading of messages that are very important for the future of us all.

Yeah it's very clear and a good point. We see the Earth Charter principles in the sustainable development goals as complementary. The Earth Charter offering a sort of ethical foundations and a broad vision of this interdependence and sense of ethical responsibility with a well-being of current and future generations and of course the sustainable development goals set goals and targets is just more precise. Anyway I would like to express my deep gratitude and my admiration for your leadership, the work you have done, I have been following you, of course we teach sustainable development and every year several times of the year we refer to the Brundtland Commission Report and this historical movement and of course our common future as a document and I really appreciate the work you have done and thank you so much for taking the time to have this conversation with me.

Thank you so much.

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