

Reformism Doomed to Failure? A Critical Look at the Strategy Promoted by the Brundtland Commission

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FULL TEXT

«The next few decades are crucial. The time has come to break out of past patterns. Attempts to maintain social and ecological stability through old approaches to development and environmental protection will increase instability. Security must be sought through change.» This was the basic message of the World Commission on Environment and Development chaired by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, published under the title «Our common future» (Oxford University Press 1987). A year after publication of the report the time seems ripe to reconsider its strategy for protecting the global environment and promoting development in the Third World. Throughout the report the Commission emphasises the common interests of all states and peoples in solving the global environmental and development problems, because our common survival is at stake. In this way the Commission tries to use the environmental threats as a lever to promote a new start in development cooperation. Since everybody depends on the global environment, all states have an interest in eliminating poverty which is the major threat to our common environment. The echo from the report of the Brandt Commission - «North-South. A program for survival» - is unmistakable. That commission too tried to convince all states that economic growth in the Third World is in the global interest in economic, political and security terms. The results of this appeal from the early 1980s today speak for themselves, and give ample reason to ask whether the Brundtland Commission will suffer the same fate.

On the one hand the Commission openly acknowledges the weaknesses of present international institutions, admitting that «a reorientation (towards sustainable development) on a continuing basis is simply beyond the reach of present decision-making structures and institutional arrangements, both national and international» (pages 22 - 23). On the other hand the Commission is itself incapable of devising solutions which go beyond the institutional status quo. Compared with its ringing rhetoric its final appeal to the UN General Assembly to set up a UN program on sustainable development is at best disappointing.

On this background I find it appropriate to ask whether the Commission has a realistic view of the relationship between the diagnosis and the prescribed medicine. Its practical strategy can be summarized in three main points. It seeks to:

- 1) redefine state interests through rational arguments towards national decision-makers
- 2) promote its environment and development strategy through multilateral diplomacy in various interstate organisations
- 3) influence basic grassroot attitudes through the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

As the Commission itself has underlined, time is now a critical factor. It is therefore crucial to choose the appropriate strategy in pursuing the overall objectives right from the start.

In drawing up such a strategy it is essential to learn from the experience of North-South negotiations through the 1970s and 80s, whether under the labels of the New Economic Order, North-South dialogue, the UNCTAD Conferences etc. Throughout this process all the three elements in the Commission's strategy have been applied: The developing countries' international commissions and some small Western countries have on numerous occasions tried to convince the large Western powers that economic development in the Third World will be to their benefit. Such arguments fell on deaf ears through the 70s and from the beginning of the 80s they have been

rejected in both word and deed. For decision-makers in Washington and London, Africa, or at least the largest part of it, could sink into the ocean without their interests as presently defined being involved. Why should the misery of the Third World be any problem to them as long as they can live with rapidly increasing poverty in their own countries apparently without much concern?

The attitude of the Western powers is in line with the foreign policy thinking which in political science carries the label «political realism». A politician acting out of this school of thought is primarily interested in protecting national interests narrowly defined and above all preserve or improve the country's relative position of power. This explains why the Western powers have only given minimal concessions which have been necessary to keep the dialogue going - and that has not amounted to many millimetres per year. At the same time they retain firm control over the most important decision-making centres like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and over international trade and finance through transnational companies and banks. In their view foreign aid is an instrument of foreign policy which is used to reward friends and punish enemies.

Decision-makers of this kind react primarily to direct threats to their own tangible interests: When Mexico is threatened by bankruptcy, American authorities, banks and the IMF react rapidly and apparently effectively. When Central America is seen to be threatened by revolution there seems to be no limit to the kind of money the American Government is willing to commit to protect its self-interests.

Is it possible to convince decision-makers of this type that their long-term interests are at stake when the global ecosystem is threatened? In my judgement this looks very unlikely under present political circumstances. If these decision-makers nevertheless should be convinced by the Commission's argument on this point it does not necessarily follow that they will accept its recommendations. If that were to be the case they would have to accept the Commission's analysis of the interrelationship between environmental problems, poverty and the structure of the world economy, which seems even more unlikely. According to the liberalist philosophy which prevails in the Western powers it is not the inequality in the world economy that creates poverty, but barriers to trade and what they consider socialism in the Third World. In this view of the world the salvation for the tropical forests and the global environment lies in economic growth, free trade and free access for private companies in the developing countries. It does not make things easier that the Western powers have close allies in the governing elites of many Third World countries. As long as the latter takes care of Western economic and political interests, the great powers will be willing to ignore corruption and mismanagement. For example the issue of capital flight from the Third World has been conspicuously absent in many debt rescheduling operations in the 1980s. While the creditors led by the IMF have insisted on tough adjustment measures within the developing countries, their elites have been allowed to export enormous amounts of dollar. Independent estimates indicate that wealthy Latin- Americans have assets worth 180 billion dollars in the West. There is no reason to assume that these elites feel any more concern for the 1 50 million people living in absolute poverty in Latin America, than decision-makers in the West. Some of the reactions to the Brundtland report indicate that there is indeed widespread scepticism among Third World elites to what they perceive as «green imperialism». They will argue that the new ecological message from the West is used to slow down industrialization in the Third World, trying to appeal to pro-development circles which are opposed to conditionality and intervention in the domestic affairs of Third World countries on grounds of principle.

The political circumstances surrounding the report of the Brundtland Commission are therefore not very encouraging. Indeed it is hard to see how the report can avoid suffering the same fate as its well-intentioned predecessors: the Pearson report, the Tinbergen report «Reshaping the international order», (1976) and the two reports of the Brandt Commission (1980 and 1983). This means that the report will in practice be handed over to the diplomatic machinery of the UN which is capable of grinding any message to pieces while at the same time appearing to promote concrete action. This will reconfirm that the required reorientation lies beyond the bounds of today's decision-making structures.

In the following I will sketch some elements in an alternative strategy which takes into account the experience of unsuccessful North-South negotiations over the last two decades. My argument is based on the following premises.

- The Commission is right in its analysis of the connection between global environmental problems, poverty and the

international economic system.

- the policies of the large Western powers will in principle be dominated by economic liberalism and in practice by narrow political and economic self-interests - basically the same as today. This implies indifference, scepticism or outright hostility towards the environment and development message from key decision-makers in the West.
- Third World elites will be primarily concerned about protecting their own standard of living and position of power. They regard the Commission's rhetoric as a possible threat in both respects - in many cases with good reason.
- They will demand that the developed countries pay the bill for environmental protection in the Third World.
- UN organisations will continue to be plagued by ineffectiveness, bureaucratic rivalry, financial crisis and lack of new recruitment.

If this assessment of the future turns out to be correct, a major re-orientation of the Commission's strategy is required. There are no easy solutions to overcoming these difficulties, but I will nevertheless present the following elements in an alternative ecopolitical strategy:

Clear operative goals

The term sustainable development may soon turn into an empty cliché in spite of the Commission's good intentions. It is therefore necessary to formulate concrete standards of behaviour for state conduct which can be measured in practice in order to register progress or failure.

Independent monitoring and public reporting

In this area it is important first to define some key ecological and development indicators such as desertification, soil erosion, nutritional standard and child mortality in vulnerable groups, changes in temperature or climate in the polar areas, specific types of pollution in the atmosphere. The next step is objective fact-finding by experts independent of governments and political preferences. This can be regarded as a network of watchdogs at strategic points covering the whole spectrum of ecological and development issue areas. The elements of this can already be found scattered out in different UN organizations and elsewhere but it is vital that information is collected at one strategic point and reported independently from there. It is worth considering establishing a separate NGO responsible for such fact-finding and reporting in close cooperation with other international organizations. Regular publication of such data will in itself have an impact on world public opinion and thereby on national decision-makers.

Exposure of environmental damage and poverty in inter-governmental bodies

The network mentioned above must bring its main conclusions either in a yearly report or in emergency reports whenever required, to the inter-governmental arena, in practice the UN system. Whenever required by the situation, for example violation of critical values, the Security Council can be summoned at short notice. This will demonstrate that environment and development problems can be as threatening as armed conflicts. Such UN discussions will not necessarily lead to action, but will force the issues on to the political agenda and oblige politicians to assume a stance under public scrutiny. Governments choosing to neglect the recommendations of the Commission, will in this manner be exposed to world public opinion. Such exposure will in itself have a deterrent effect at least in countries with a minimum of free public opinion: governments will know in advance that violation of international standards will be discovered and revealed and will therefore do more than they otherwise would have done to prevent it. If long term consequences are taken into account in such international standards, such a system of follow-up can stimulate national authorities to take long term global considerations into account in their own decisions.

Grassroot activity

The Commission has itself strongly emphasized the significance of the role played by nongovernmental organizations in the field of environment and development. The problem is that many of those are still in a weak position in developing countries as a result of poverty, lack of education and in some cases direct repression. Hence there is a need for effective development assistance through many channels, directly to local institutions and organizations, through inter-governmental bodies or international NGOs to their sister organizations in the Third World. Such assistance can give the victims of environmental degradation and poverty a voice in the international community. In addition such activities can realize latent coalitions for example between traditional conservation groups in the West and indigenous peoples in the tropical forests.

An international NGO network will give oppressed groups in the Third World a possibility to speak in public to the world. In many cases UN bodies will become the natural focus for the lobbying activities of NGOs.

The power of good examples: pilot projects and like-minded cooperation

The political conditions described above will make it very difficult to organize an effective and coordinated international effort in this field in the years to come. If that turns out to be the case, it is even more important to develop limited forms of international cooperation between a smaller number of developing and developed countries. This cannot in itself solve global problems. The significance lies in the demonstration effect. When it became clear towards the end of the 1970s that the discussions on a new international economic order would not lead to real negotiations, not to speak of concrete results, the idea of such limited cooperation under the heading mini-NIEO was aired, in particular among the Nordic countries. For various reasons this idea has not been tested in real life, primarily because of lack of political interest. This is even more deplorable because such experiments could have given us experience of interest for the area of environment and development.

The idea is simple enough: a few of the small European countries, for example the Nordic countries, could develop interesting cooperative projects on environment and development with like-minded countries in the Third World independent of what happens in the multilateral diplomacy. A fascinating thought in this regard lies in the so-called debt for nature swaps which implies buying LDC debt at a large discount in the international financial market and using the proceeds in local currency for environmental purposes.

The alternative strategy sketched here is not necessarily cheaper than the Commission's proposals primarily aimed at the UN system. The question can still be raised: from where to take new funds for this purpose? If however one takes the Commission's analysis and conclusions seriously, such objections do not carry much weight. If it is true that the global environmental problems are a threat to our common future, the efforts in this area must be compared with the resources we use to take care of our security in other ways. It is only when such a trade-off, between environmental and military defence has become possible, that one can realistically hope for the objectives of the Brundtland Commission to be fulfilled. As long as the governments are not willing to make such a trade-off there is good reason to fear that global environmental protection will be much rhetoric and little action.

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